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# Public Sector Employees' Experiences Executing Strategic Management in a Political Environment

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Aarion L. Franklin

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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2019

Abstract

Public Sector Employees' Experiences Executing Strategic Management in a Political

Environment

by

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MBA, University of Maryland University College, 2007

BA, University of Maryland, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

May 2019

## Abstract

Public sector organizations have practiced strategic management for more than 30 years. Strategic management in the public sector is subjected to political influence, as resources and major decisions are typically managed by elected and appointed officials. The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to identify and report the lived experiences of public sector employees who have been subjected to political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in the State of Maryland. The study's conceptual framework was based on stakeholder theory and economic theory of the firm. A purposeful sample of 15 Maryland State Government employees shared their experiences through semi structured in-person interviews. Data were collected and transcribed using the Rev.com mobile application and was loaded into Dedoose software for analysis. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method was employed for data analysis. The findings revealed the lived experiences of the participants with results in 5 thematic areas: leadership tenure, managing for results, strategic management resources, influence, and political skills. The findings further revealed that legislation that required strategic planning and performance management in Maryland's government has influenced its public sector employees to think strategically. Application of the findings of this study through positive political influences may align careerist actions as they prepare for the future needs of their organizations.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who empowered me to complete the long journey to a doctorate degree. To my amazing wife who shared my dreams and helped me bring them to reality. Thank you for holding my hand and helping me find my way whenever I felt lost. To my mother who taught me I could do anything I set my mind and heart to. To my son Honor for always finding a way to make me smile and reminding me daily to 'do my homework.' To my grandparents for their silent inspiration and guiding spirit.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Public sector organizations began adopting strategic management in the early 1980s (Johnsen, 2015; Poister, 2010). Although public and private sector organizations both engage in strategic management, most research in the area has been focused on private companies, whereas public sector organizations have been overlooked (Axelsson, 2016). Though there has been a recent increase in academic interest in public sector strategic management, there has been little empirical research into how it is practiced by public sector executives (Johnsen, 2015).

Political processes are more pervasive in public sector organizations than in the private sector (Abbas & Awan, 2017; Fu, 2012; Johnsen, 2015). Public sector resources are often determined and allocated through political processes within legislative and executive branches (Johnsen, 2015). The political nature of resource allocation may influence the ability of public sector organizations to implement the strategies developed by their executives. Thus, there is a need to understand how those executives experience those influences.

The results of this qualitative phenomenological study may add to knowledge on strategic management in the public sector regarding how political influences are experienced by employees. To facilitate the gain in knowledge, I used the descriptive phenomenological psychological method (Giorgi, 2009). Findings from this study may increase understanding of political influence on individual and group decisions associated with strategic management. These findings may result in positive social change through improved spending and accountability of government revenues.

The remainder of this chapter includes the background of the topic, the general and specific problem this study addressed, and the purpose of this study. This chapter also provides the research question and conceptual framework that guided this study. Finally, this chapter provides a description of the nature of the study, definitions of key terminology, assumptions, delimitations and limitations of the study, and the significance of the study to practice and social change.

### **Background of the Study**

Strategic management in the context of the public sector has been studied by several researchers. For example, Hansen and Ferlie (2016) assessed two models of strategic management in the public sector: Porter's strategic position model and the resource-based view of strategy. The applicability of these models is partially based on the degree of administrative autonomy public organizations have, which is determined by politicians (Hansen & Ferlie, 2016). Johnsen (2015) also studied the relationship of strategic management thinking and actual strategic management behavior in the public sector, evaluating challenges like short tenures of executives, frequent changes in political agendas, and instability in coalitions. Further, Van der Voet (2016) examined public sector organizational change and the impacts of bureaucratic features and concluded that future research into public sector organizational change should focus on their organizational environment. Finally, though performance management is essential for strategic management (Johnsen, 2015), the greater the degree of external political influence, the less likely a government agency is to successfully implement performance management activities (Lee & Kim, 2012). The negative relationship between political

influence and successful implementation of performance management demonstrates the importance of understanding the broader relationship between political influence and strategic management. The studies outlined in this section illustrate the political nature of strategic management in the public sector and the need for further research on the topic.

The public sector has unique leadership challenges. Leadership in the public context requires the ability to address complex public policy issues as well as the use of negotiation and conflict resolution to balance political interests and values (Fu, 2012; Hansen & Ferlie, 2016). Although each public sector organization has a specific function, they have common leadership requirements including developing and communicating strategic direction, considering the needs of a range of external and internal stakeholders, scanning the environment for issues, and influencing policy decisions and practices (Tizard, 2012). Further, public sector leaders must maintain the confidence of elected officials and their staff, who represent the public they serve (Tizard, 2012). These leadership challenges differentiate the public sector from the private sector. Moreover, they support the necessity of leadership research specific to the public sector.

Another challenge for public sector leaders is that they must focus on being stewards of the limited resources available to them. Their sector has public and political pressure to deliver more services with fewer resources. Funding reductions may result in reduced services, restructuring of service delivery models, staffing reductions, and other significant changes (Tizard, 2012). Further, the availability of public sector organization resources is often determined through political processes such as legislative budget approvals (Johnsen, 2015). The political nature of resource allocation influences the



ability of public sector organizations to implement strategy. There is a need to understand how public sector executives experience these influences.

There is also a need for significant levels of collaboration in the public sector. This includes collaboration with private sector organizations, elected officials, other public sector leaders, and social organizations (Tizard, 2012). The primary reasons for collaboration include obtaining political buy-in, off-setting risk, obtaining skills and expertise that are not organic to their organization, creating choice or competition, and addressing issues that can only be handled through collaboration (Tizard, 2012). Importantly, public sector leaders face a political context in addition to the normal managerial issues faced in most organizations (Fu, 2012). In this study, I examined how public sector executives negotiate that political context to conduct the strategic management of their organizations.

Finally, bureaucratic, institutional, and cultural factors encourage public sector organizations to manage with a focus on day-to-day issues versus planning strategically. Political processes are more pervasive in public sector organizations than in the private sector (Abbas & Awan, 2017; Fu, 2012; Johnsen, 2015). These processes are inherent to both the internal environment of public sector organizations and the external environment they operate in. Empirical evidence has shown that government agencies with formal protections from political authorities, or higher levels of autonomy, have a greater propensity to implement the conditions necessary for strategic management (Lee & Kim, 2012). There is a difference between strategic planning and strategic thinking, and there is a lack of research on the practice of strategic thinking by public sector organizations

(Johnsen, 2015). Additionally, the level of strategic planning capacity differs greatly among government agencies (Lee & Kim, 2012). Gaining an understanding of the specific experiences of executives throughout the strategic planning process lends itself to the approach used in this study.

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem is that the consequences of political influences on the strategic management of the public sector are not fully understood by its stakeholders (Tama, 2018; Tama, 2017). There are an estimated 22.3 million public sector employees in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Those employees, as well as the American public, are impacted by the practice of strategic management that is rudimentary compared to that in the private sector. Recent increases in social and financial pressures have bolstered the need for strategic management in the public sector (Poister, 2010). A further understanding of the political influences in public sector strategic management is essential to understanding its effective execution (Baskarada & Hanlon, 2017; Tama, 2018).

The specific problem is that the public does not fully understand the consequences of political process influences on the strategic management of Maryland agencies. Strategic management in the public sector is complex, as it combines administrative, managerial, and political rationalities (Mazouz et al., 2016). Strategic management also requires participation from actors of different types within organizations such as senior leaders, planners, financial professionals, and consultants (Johnsen, 2015). Researchers have identified that political approaches to strategic management can result in ill-defined

strategies, ambiguity, and lack of commitment from public sector employees (Favoreu, Carassus, & Maurel, 2016). These results are exemplified by strategic management in Maryland (Nirappil & Hernandez, 2017; Spivack, 2015). An investigation by Maryland's Office of Legislative Audits in 2004 revealed that agencies may comply with the legislated reporting requirements rather than using the tools for actual strategic management (Meyers, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify and report the lived experiences of public sector employees who have been subjected to political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in Maryland. I used the descriptive phenomenological psychological method as described by Giorgi (2009). The phenomenon is the specific elements of the political environment that impact the strategic management of Maryland organizations. Purposive and snowball sampling (Griffith, Morris, & Thakar, 2016) were used to identify qualified participants. Data were collected via open-ended questions in semistructured interviews of 15 participants or until data saturation is achieved (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants consisted of managers and senior leaders who regularly participated in at least one of their state agency's strategic management activities.

### **Research Question**

The overarching research question was "What are the lived experiences of public sector employees who encounter political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in the State of Maryland?"

## **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is a synthesis of concepts used to provide a broad understanding of a phenomenon (Imenda, 2014). Conceptual frameworks are helpful to the researcher in the data collection, interpretation, and explanation processes where there is no dominant theoretical perspective (Imenda, 2014). The development of the conceptual framework should include relevant literature that reflects the political, cultural, environmental, and social concepts of the phenomenon being studied (Jabareen, 2009).

Strategic management requires participation from various stakeholders who may have conflicting interests (Johnsen, 2015; Mazouz et al., 2016), which is why I chose stakeholder theory as part of the conceptual framework. Freeman (1984) detailed the relationship between three business problems in his work on stakeholder theory: value creation and trade, ethics of capitalism, and managerial mindset. Firms are comprised of stakeholders who often have conflicting demands. Organizational leaders have a moral obligation to manage the competitive and cooperative relationships of those stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Parmar et al., 2010). Freeman compared stakeholders based on the dimensions of interest and power. The interest dimension is categorized by market stake, equity stake, and social stake, whereas the power dimension is categorized by economic power, political power, and voting power (Gomes et al., 2010).

Economic theory of the firm, the second part of the conceptual framework for this study, is primarily used in economic and management disciplines. However, strategic management in the public sector combines managerial, administrative, and political

rationalities (Mazouz et al., 2016). Public sector managers balance the economic requirements of customers, the government, and the public in their decision-making processes (Fu, 2012). Coase (1937), who authored the seminal work on economic theory of the firm, attempted to answer several questions about organizations including “Why do they exist?,” “How are they created?,” and “How do they perform, compete, and behave?” (Peng et al., 2016). Coase focused on actual behavior of firms in the market as opposed to the anticipated behavior of firms predicted by pure economists. The theory provides a basis to examine the rationality of public sector organizational decision-making. Additionally, because research has been focused on private sector firms (Peng et al., 2016), the application of the economic theory of the firm in this study may address this gap in the literature.

The conceptual framework for this study was based on stakeholder theory and economic theory of the firm to represent the challenges of public sector managers to balance the needs of their multiple stakeholders while considering the economic realities of their sector. The synthesis of stakeholder theory and economic theory of the firm accommodates the political nature of the public sector including the roles of organizations, political actors and the groups they represent, public sector stakeholders such as the public, public sector resources such as tax-revenue, and the researcher.

### **Nature of the Study**

For this study, I used a qualitative methodology. The researcher in qualitative research seeks to explore a phenomenon rather than testing hypotheses (Levitt et al., 2018). Qualitative research is usually identified as constructivism from an

epistemological perspective. Constructivism is the view that truth and knowledge are the result of perspective (Cottone, 2017). The study of political influences on strategic management was suited for a constructivist epistemology, as constructivism is an appropriate methodology to understand strategy (Mir & Watson, 2000).

I used a descriptive phenomenological design for this study. The purpose of phenomenological research is to identify and report the lived experiences of the individuals being studied (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenological research has the aim of gaining a rich understanding of how a phenomenon is experienced without concern for quantifying or generalizing (Vagle, 2018). A phenomenological design was selected because it would be difficult to measure how individuals experience political influences using a quantitative method. Although it may be possible to quantify attributes of political influence, I sought a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of public sector employees. Empirical research in this area would have been difficult because the variables are difficult to measure directly. Further, the number of variables would make it difficult to identify causality (Wu, Yanping, & Pengcheng, 2014). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method is specific to human consciousness (Giorgi, 2009). I selected a descriptive phenomenological over other phenomenological methods due to its alignment with psychology as opposed to philosophy. The psychological concepts of the narrative self and the social mind align with the concepts of influence (Jones, 2003).

## **Types and Sources of Data**

Semistructured interviews provided the data for this study. This study involved interviews of public sector employees involved in the strategic management of government agencies in Maryland. Planning and other strategic management activities require interactions between various levels of organizational hierarchy (Johnsen, 2015). The influence of politics was revealed in participants' lived experiences.

Maryland government participants were chosen because the Maryland state government has legislated requirements for strategic management. Maryland implemented a strategic management program in 1997 titled Managing for Results (MFR), which required Maryland's 20 executive departments to conduct strategic planning, performance management, and performance-based budgeting. Its requirements are similar to the Government Performance and Results Act of the federal government. Maryland executive departments each have a secretary who is appointed by the governor of Maryland with the consent of the legislature (Maryland Department of Budget and Management [DBM], 2017; Gray, Jackson, Kramer, & Zimmerman, 2014). Maryland has over 248 executive branch agencies led by the governor. The exact number of Maryland employees directly involved in strategic management can only be estimated, as DBM only provides guidelines for the implementation of MFR (Gray et al., 2014). An estimate of 1,000 employees is based on the minimum requirements for each executive branch agency to have a MFR coordinator, a budget director to verify the budget request, and a chief executive to verify the contents of the documents. However, the number of potential

participants could exceed 2,000 employees based on the usual participation of agency senior leaders, financial professionals, and planners (Mazouz et al., 2016; Johnsen, 2015).

### **Definitions**

*Political activities:* Political activities include legislative actions, appropriation processes, administrative procedures, compulsory reporting, performance and financial audits, agency design, and oversight hearings. Further, they include actions by politicians to appoint, influence, or remove individuals from leadership positions in government agencies (Bello & Spano, 2015).

*Strategic management:* Strategic management is the alignment of external demand with internal capabilities in the form of plans, positions, patterns, plots and perspectives (Johnsen, 2015).

### **Assumptions**

There are several assumptions related to the conduct of this study. Assumptions are factors outside of the researcher's control but are essential to the existence of the research problem. Further, they are factors that the researcher can expect to be true or expect to happen (Simon, 2011). The first assumption is that participants answered interview questions honestly. This assumption is based on the voluntary nature of participation in the study as well as informed consent procedures. I explained the potential benefits of the study during the introduction and informed consent procedures. The participants were also informed of the confidentiality of their responses, efforts to keep them anonymous, and that they could end the interview or choose to not answer every question. The second assumption was that strategic management would continue to



be stressed and practiced by Maryland throughout the conduct of the study. This assumption was based on existing legislated requirements for strategic planning, performance management, and performance-based budgeting within the state (Maryland Office of Legislative Audits, 2004).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Delimitations are characteristics of the study that identify the boundaries and limit the scope and are characteristics within the control of the researcher (Simon, 2011). The scope of the study was delimited to strategic management programs required by Maryland's Office of the Governor and Office of Budget and Management. Purposive sampling was used to gain participants from the population of current and former Maryland state government employees involved in strategic management (Groenewald, 2004). The starting point for the sample was the Maryland DBM's list of agency coordinators for its MFR Program. The participants met the following criteria: they served in their positions for at least 1 year prior to their interview and they were responsible for or regularly participated in their organization's strategic management activities. Participants who were excluded included current employees directly appointed by the governor such as the chief executive officer or executive director of an agency. Politicization is more likely for chief executives than for other senior leadership positions, therefore they are more likely to be a source of political influence than a recipient (Enns-Jedenastik, 2016).

The focus of this study was political influences on the strategic management activities of state agencies. Political influences on other organizational activities were

excluded from the scope. Semistructured interviews allowed participants to fully express how they have experienced political influences while executing their strategic management responsibilities. I sought their experiences relative to aspects of political influence including formal controls such as the promulgation of legislation, appropriation processes, and oversight hearings as well as less formal controls such as reporting requirements, procedural requirements, and agency organizational structure (Furlong, 1998). I also sought their experiences with informal oversight such as personal telephonic communication and private meetings versus formal oversight such as public meetings and hearings (Ogul, 1976). Understanding the lived experiences of public sector employees pertaining to political influence may assist policy makers and the public in understanding barriers to effective strategic management.

Semistructured, in-depth interviews were used for data collection, which inspired participants to provide voluminous data necessary to support the descriptive phenomenological psychological method. The study was limited to 20 participants or until data saturation was achieved (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I achieved data saturation with 15 participants. Qualitative phenomenological design makes larger sample sizes impractical as it requires in-depth and lengthy interviews (Geoenewald, 2004).

### **Limitations**

Limitations are weaknesses in the study that are generally out of the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). There were three limitations identified for this study. First, the study was limited in methodology because it only featured qualitative data. Future studies using quantitative data may address this specific limitation. Second, the study was limited

by its sample's restriction to only Maryland state government employees. This limits the generalizability of the results to other public sector organizations. The third limitation was unintended biases due to the researcher being the primary data collector. Bias were mitigated through an interview guide that was field tested to evaluate its design prior to its use (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

### **Significance of the Study**

The focus of this study was on how political influence is experienced by public sector employees engaged in strategic management. The focus was not the quantity nor magnitude of the political influence but how public sector employees experience the influence. These experiences are inclusive of, but not limited to, how the influence was administered, the perceived consequences to the employee, and if it created a conflict for the employee. Stakeholders' demands of public sector organizations continue to increase (Johnsen, 2015). Political stakeholders have power over public sector organizations through many instruments including executive orders, rule-making, appointments, and budgeting (Fu, 2012). Findings from this study regarding the experiences of public sector employees may increase the public's understanding of these instruments' influence on individual and group decisions associated with strategic management, which can result in improved spending and accountability of government revenues.

### **Significance to Theory**

This study's significance to theory is my application of stakeholder theory and economic theory of the firm to address a gap in literature regarding how the effective execution of public sector strategic management is influenced by politics (see Baskarada

& Hanlon, 2017; Tama, 2018). The study of public sector strategic management should be focused on the organizational environment that is political and complex (Van der Voet, 2016). The conceptual framework may address the call for strategic management theories to integrate theories, establish evaluative criteria, and explore new logic and methods (Bao, 2015).

### **Significance to Practice**

If public sector organizations' planning activities are influenced by politics, the performance of these organizations may be improved through an awareness of these influences (Hansen & Ferlie, 2016; Miller, 2015). The results of this study may benefit public officials, senior leaders in public sector organizations, and government budget and management professionals by identifying influences they may be unaware of. The results of the study identified influences that had positive results as well as influences with negative results. Scholars in the disciplines of business, management, strategy, public administration, and political science may also be interested in the results of this study.

### **Summary**

The context of this study on the influence that political processes have on the strategic management of public sector organizations was outlined in this chapter. This chapter also included the framework of the study used to understand political influence on strategic management: stakeholder theory and economic theory of the firm. This chapter also contained an overview of the gap in the literature related to the phenomenon and a statement of the research question. Chapter 2 provides a review of current literature

on political influence and strategic management in the public sector as well as the use of phenomenology as the method of the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Strategic management has become a common practice in the public sector. However, its ability to positively impact the performance of organizations is unclear (Favoreu, Carassus, & Maurel, 2016). The public sector is partly characterized by political processes, including decoupled strategic planning and budget management (Abbas & Awan, 2017; Fu, 2012; Johnsen, 2015). Political influences can undermine the routine execution of decision-making processes in the public sector through undefined strategies (Bello & Spano, 2015; Favoreu et al., 2016). In this qualitative phenomenological study, I explored the lived experiences of public sector employees who were subjected to political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in Maryland.

Although numerous researchers have studied strategic management in the public sector, a further understanding of the political influences may influence its effective execution (Baskarada & Hanlon, 2017; Tama, 2018). Maryland's strategic management program comprises elements that may be subject to political influence such as performance-based budgeting, performance management, and planning. In this chapter, I discuss this study's literature search strategy, relevant literature on the conceptual framework, other researchers' perspectives on public sector strategic management, relevant literature on political influence, and gaps in the literature.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature reviewed for the study was gathered from the databases accessed through the Walden University Library, local libraries, and purchased publications. The databases included the ABI/Inform Collection, Sage Journals, Business Source Complete, Emerald Management, Science Direct, and Elsevier. The keywords searched included *strategic management, public sector strategic management, public sector strategic planning, political influence, public sector performance management, oversight of the bureaucracy, performance-based budgeting, stakeholder theory, and economic theory of the firm.*

### **Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual frameworks provide the researcher with a theoretical approach to research problems that are difficult to explain meaningfully with a singular theory (Imenda, 2014). Conceptual frameworks also help in the data collection, interpretation, and explanation processes where a dominant theoretical perspective is absent (Imenda, 2014). Theories from multiple disciplines are often required to reflect the cultural, social, environmental, and political concepts of the phenomenon being studied, with each concept in the framework helping identify factors in the study as well as the relationships between them (Jabareen, 2009). The conceptual framework of the study is based on the stakeholder theory and the economic theory of the firm.

### **Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholders are generally defined as organizations and individuals that a firm relies on for the accomplishment of its strategic direction as well as those that have an

interest in the firm's outcomes and processes (Freeman, 1984; Harrison, Freeman, & Sade Abreu, 2015). Stakeholder theory describes the relationship between three business problems: value creation and trade, the ethics of capitalism, and the managerial mindset (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders are based on the dimensions of interest and power (Freeman, 1984). The interest dimension is categorized by market stake, equity stake, and social stake. The power dimension is categorized by economic power, political power, and voting power (Gomes et al., 2010).

An important concept of stakeholder theory is that all stakeholders should be treated with fairness and honesty, rather than focusing on a subset of stakeholders, such as customers, shareholders, or employees (Harrison et al., 2015). The leaders of organizations have the moral obligation to manage the conflicting demands of its stakeholders. For example, it may be fair to treat an employee differently than a shareholder. This concept is relevant to the present study, as it addresses the role of political influence in making strategic decisions for organizations designed to serve the public. The conceptual framework was used to focus this research study to learn the lived experiences of public sector employees engaged in the strategic management of their organizations.

### **Economic Theory of the Firm**

Firms are created and exist in markets for specific purposes. Coase (1937) questioned the purpose of firms, as the economic system depicted by economists does not need centralized control. The system “works itself” and is coordinated through pricing (Coase, 1937, p. 387). Contrary to the works of other economists at the time, Coase



explained that firms are still created and serve an important purpose. The economic theory of the firm addresses why they exist, how they are created, and how they perform, compete, and behave (Coase, 1937; Peng et al., 2016). The economic theory of the firm has been influential in the discipline of management, as it has shaped several management theories including the theory of perfect competition, the theory of transactional costs, and theory of industrial organization (Storchevoi, 2015).

Firms exist because they can economize transactional costs more efficiently than markets (Coase, 1937; Peng et al., 2016). Public sector organizations exist, as their transactional costs for some goods and services are more efficient than that markets can offer (Peng et al., 2016). For example, public services such as law enforcement, emergency medical services, and sanitation are likely to be offered at a lower cost by the government than private sector firms. The economic theory of the firm provides a basis to examine the rationality of public sector organizational decision-making. The theory can account for the behaviors that management theorists feel are missing from the specific theories focused on strategy such as the nature, scope, competitive advantages, and structure of the firm (Storchevoi, 2015). Political influence may cause strategic decisions to be made that are contrary to sound economic principles. Figure 1 illustrates a concept map of the conceptual framework as it applied to strategic management in this study.

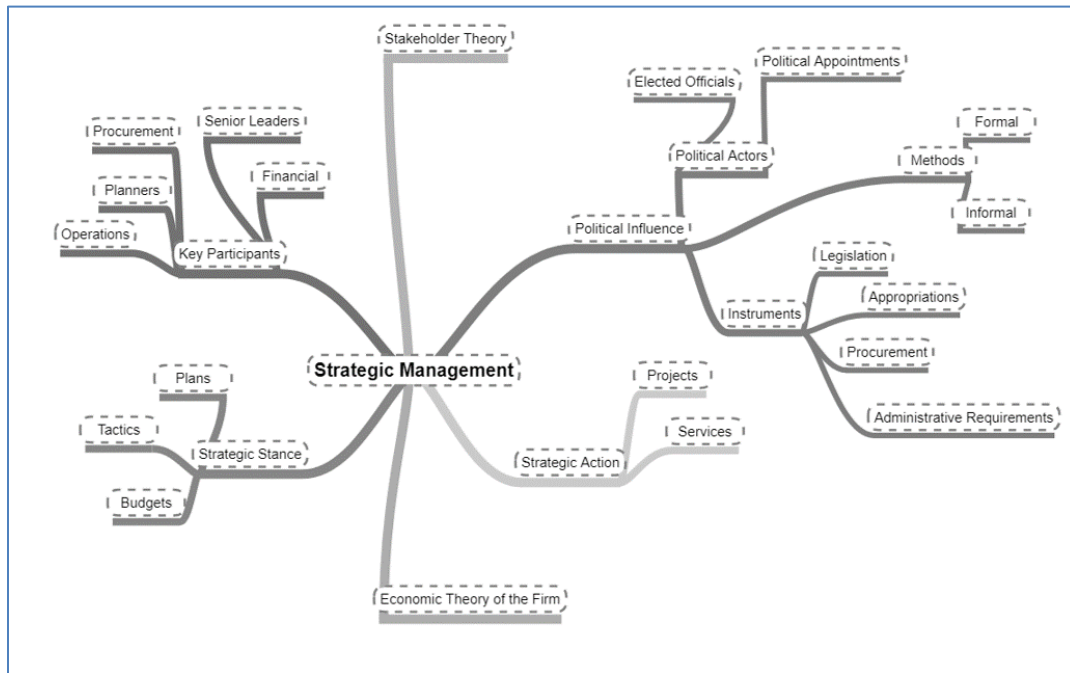


Figure 1. Concept map.

## Literature Review

### Public Sector Overview

The public sector is the part of the economy that the government contributes. The government provides essential services to citizens that typically include public education, transportation, water, sanitation, health services, and safety and security services (Smets & Knack, 2016). Government revenues typically consist of collected taxes and debts issued to finance these essential services. In the United States, government revenues account for one-third of the gross domestic product (OECD, 2017). In 2015, there were over a total of 14 million government employees in the United States who work for the local, state, and federal governments (OECD, 2017).

The public sector is made up of more than the administrative agencies under the control of the government's chief executive. There are organizations that are not

administrative agencies that still have a connection to the government (O'Connell, 2014). For example, the United States Postal Service (USPS), Amtrak, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the National Guard are organizations that have a connection to the federal government but are not administrative agencies. These organizations are aligned at the intersection between the role of the government and either the private sector or another government. For instance, the National Guard comprises state-level organizations that are funded by the federal government. The president has the authority to federalize the National Guard as necessary to respond to emergencies or for military service (O'Connell, 2014). Additionally, Amtrak and the USPS are agencies of the federal government that serve the needs of the public; however, they are required to generate revenues that approximate or meet their expenditures and require executive and legislative action to support strategic management (O'Connell, 2014). The USPS has developed strategies to address budget deficits for the past 10 years, with the strategic plan for 2017 to 2021 dependent on Congress to pass postal reform legislation (Government Accountability Office, 2017). These organizations also operate similarly to the private sector, and their managers report similar use of strategic planning and performance measurement (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). Although these organizations are different from administrative agencies, they are still part of the public sector and are subject to political influence. Therefore, the entire public sector falls within the scope of the present study.

## **Strategic Management**

Strategic management includes the decisions, commitments, and actions for addressing a firm's key challenges, which include which businesses to engage in and which strategies to execute to make profits or generate value for its owners (Ogrea, 2016; Storchvoi, 2015). It is intended to enable firms to address future challenges, whether planned or in response to the changes in their environment (Bao, 2015; Soloduch-Pelc, 2015; Storchvoi, 2015). Strategic management has two dimensions: the overall effect and future effects. The overall effect refers to the growth and survival of the organization. Future effects refer to the survival and growth of the organization over time (Bao, 2015). Strategic management involves the activities for assisting the firm to establish long-term objectives, conceptualize overall direction, conduct planning, make decisions, allocate resources, and develop emergent initiatives (Bao, 2015; Bryson, Edwards, & Van Slyke, 2018; Johnsen, 2015).

## **Origins**

The terms *strategic planning* and *strategic management* are often used interchangeably. The term *strategic planning* is primarily used by practitioners, whereas the term *strategic management* is used by scholars (Davis, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the terms are not synonymous. Strategic planning is a component of strategic management (Corneliu, 2013; Davis, 2011).

Strategic planning was first used in the 1950s and grew in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s (Davis, 2011; Petrova, 2015). Drucker introduced the concept of management by objective in theory in 1954, and Selznick introduced the concept of

SWOT analysis in 1957. The term *strategic management* was first used by Ansof in 1965 as he outlined the concept of gap analysis (Petrova, 2015). The concept of strategic planning was heralded as a methodology to address many business problems; however, it lost favor with practitioners in the 1980s due to the belief that it did not result in higher financial returns (Davis, 2011).

Strategic management as a practice and an academic discipline has evolved since the 1960s. Initially, the development of its concepts, practices, tools, and procedures primarily took place in the private sector (Bryson et al., 2018; Johnsen, 2015). Its evolution is delineated into four phases (Cristiana & Anca, 2013). Phase 1 transpired during the 1950s and 1960s and consisted primarily of financial planning efforts that transitioned to financial planning at the enterprise level (Cristiana & Anca, 2013; Davis, 2011). Phase 2 was characterized by forecast-based planning. The shift to this phase expanded the planning horizon from annual-term budgets to that of 3- to 5-year periods to account for projects lasting longer than a year (Cristiana & Anca, 2013). The third phase took place during the 1980s and 1990s and was characterized by a shift to firms conducting the analysis of their competitive environments. This led firms to consider strategic alternatives and focus on the accomplishment of objectives. Firms also began seeking competitive advantages through improved resource use and competencies. Two academic journals pertaining to the subject were created during this phase, namely the *Journal of Business Strategy* and the *Strategic Management Journal* (Cristiana & Anca, 2013). The fourth phase began in 2000 and was characterized by a focus on ethics, corporate social responsibility, and the development of global strategies (Cristiana &

Anca, 2013). The discipline continues to evolve and grow, including its adoption by the public sector.

Strategic management as an academic discipline has been subject to criticism. Strategic management, compared to disciplines such as economics and law, is immature (Cox, Daspit, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2012). Additionally, researchers have argued that strategic management research is too academic and is not sufficient to address the current needs of practitioners in the contemporary environment (Bao, 2015). The poor applicability of theory to practice, vague boundaries between theories, and a lack of consensus in strategic management theories hamper the ability of strategic management research to assist practitioners in addressing future challenges (Bao, 2015; Cox et al., 2012). This is supported by other researchers who have observed that strategic management overlaps other disciplines such as sociology, economics, and marketing (Thomas, Wilson, & Leeds, 2013). However, the field of strategic management is recognized by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (Cox et al., 2012). Future strategic management research should focus on the growth and survival of organizations instead of significance, curiosity, novelty, scope, and actionability (Bao, 2015) as well as refine existing strategic management theories, conduct further empirical research using refined research methods, and conduct studies that have practical application in the dynamic global environment (Cox et al., 2012).

**Key activities.** Strategic management is characterized by common components: vision, mission, values, strategic planning, policies and procedures, budgeting, objectives, and informational standards (Corneliu, 2013; Davis, 2011; Favoreu et al., 2016). The key

activities associated with strategic management include establishing the mission of the organization, determining the strategic objectives, specifying the strategic choices, identifying the required resources, establishing the timelines, determining the competitive advantages, developing the broad strategies, designing a global policy, and combining all those elements into the organization's overall strategy (Ciobanica, 2014; Davis, 2011). Managers use these activities to address strategic drift. Strategic drift is the lag between changes in an organization's environment and the necessary adjustment in the organization (Ayoubi, Mehrabanfar, & Banaitis, 2018). These key activities fit into the three stages of strategic management.

Strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategy evaluation are the three stages of strategic management (Ayoubi et al., 2018; Cristiana & Anca, 2013; Davis, 2011). Shujahat et al. (2017) described the Fred David's model as a three-stage model of strategic management. The term *strategic planning* is commonly used to only refer to strategy formulation, while strategic management is used to refer to all the three stages (Davis, 2011). The first stage is strategy formulation, which includes the vision and mission development, determining the strengths and weaknesses, identifying the opportunities and threats, establishing the objectives, and generating the strategies. The second stage is strategy implementation, which includes establishing the annual objectives, policy development, the allocation of resources, and the motivation of the employees to execute the strategies. The third stage is strategy evaluation, which includes performance measurement, reviewing internal and external factors, and adjusting the strategies to make corrections (Ciobanica, 2014; Davis, 2011; Shujahat et al., 2017).

Although strategic planning is extensively used by public sector organizations, it is not the only strategic management tool of value to the public sector. Tools such as strategy mapping and balanced scorecard have the potential to assist public sector organizations in balancing and operationalizing the strategies to meet the needs of different stakeholder groups (Johnsen, 2015).

**Participants.** Strategy development is a social activity based on the interaction and cooperation between individuals within an organization (Iasbech & Lavarda, 2018; Powell, 2014). Strategic management requires the actors from throughout the organization, including senior leaders, planners, financial professionals, and consultants. These participants synthesize their knowledge and experiences from their respective functions in the organization into the planning process (Axelsson, 2016; Bryson et al., 2018; Johnsen, 2015; Iasbech & Lavarda, 2018). Strategic management is a social phenomenon that is 75% personal and 25% impersonal (Powell, 2014). The study of the social aspects can be examined using the scientific methods from other academic disciplines (Power, 2014; Wu et al., 2014). In the public sector, citizen participation can provide the staff with information about the issues and concerns to inform the development of solutions (Bryson et al., 2018). Broad participation throughout the organization can be beneficial to the process, as it encourages shared ownership and the commitment to strategies (Bryson et al., 2018; Favoreu et al., 2016). Strategic management is clearly a social activity where the interactions are as important as the processes.



Strategy formulation is enhanced by an emergent process that is decentralized (Iasbech & Lavarda, 2018). Some participants assume multiple roles in strategic management. For example, some senior leaders serve as process sponsors, lending power and authority to processes in addition to allocating resources. Process champions assist in the day-to-day management of the processes. The sponsors and champions provide leadership, energize participants, and encourage the use of performance information (Bryson et al., 2018). These leadership roles contribute to the successful integration of practitioners from throughout the organization (Iasbech & Lavarda, 2018), and such integration is necessary for the management of the variety of strategic approaches.

The participants throughout an organization's hierarchy do not merely and passively deliver the strategies developed by senior leaders. Managers design and implement solutions in response to emerging problems (Ayoubi et al., 2018). They make adjustments to promulgated strategies based on their own experiences (Axelsson, 2016). Public sector employees integrate disparate yet related strategies to each other when executing them. They consider the intent of the strategies, relate similar strategies, and implement them as the conditions warrant. Strategy implementation in the public sector is incremental as opposed to radical. Career bureaucrats implement strategy cautiously, making small adjustments to processes before fully implementing them (Axelsson, 2016).

**Dimensions.** From the systems' perspective, strategic management includes two dimensions: strategic stance and strategic action. Strategic stance includes the plans and intentions conveyed in documents such as strategic plans and business plans. Strategic action includes the behaviors to execute those plans (Axelsson, 2016; Johnsen, 2015).

The terms strategic stance and strategic action were coined by Boyne and Walker (2004) in their study of the public sector strategy. These dimensions are important, as organizations' stated strategies and their actions may be inconsistent.

Strategic stance has been examined by multiple researchers, including Poister and Streib (1999), Albrechts and Balducci (2013), and Bryson and Shively Slotterback (2016). The strategic stance dimension is characterized by numerous features, including the following:

- The strategic thinking about situational requirements, purposes, and goals
- A focus on both external and internal stakeholders
- The consideration of environmental factors, including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
- The strategic thinking about the organization's context, including how decisions are made
- A focus on the future of the organization that considers how strategies may influence it
- The consideration of the challenges to implementing strategies that are developed
- The realization that although strategies are developed deliberately, they are emergent when implemented (Bryson et al., 2018).

Strategic stance can be succinctly explained as the way an organization routinely reacts to change in its environment (Pasha, Poister, & Edwards, 2018). These features are translated by the strategic management participants into the mission statements,

organizational goals, and strategies to accomplish those goals. The success of a specific strategic stance is dependent on its ability to flex effectively to changing political priorities and agendas (Boyne & Walker, 2004).

Boyne and Walker (2004) compared three types of organizations regarding strategic stance: prospectors, defenders, and reactors. Prospectors are organizations that are innovative, actively search for new markets, and constantly scan their environment for the changes to respond to. Prospectors display entrepreneurial behaviors. Defenders are late adopters of innovation, generally more conservative, and work to defend their established market or portfolio of activities (Boyne & Walker, 2004; Pasha et al., 2018). Pasha et al. (2018) differentiated between two types of defenders: differentiated and low-cost. Differentiated defenders focus on maintaining their position by focusing on loyal customers. Low-cost defenders focus on operational efficiencies through standardization (Pasha et al., 2018). Reactors are passive and only make adjustments to the strategy when their environment forces them to. Reactors typically do not have a consistent strategic stance and only react as necessary (Boyne & Walker, 2004; Bryson et al., 2018). Strategic stance is meaningless if it does not result in strategic action.

Strategic action is the operationalization or actualization of strategic stance. Five specific types of actions are used to realize strategic stance: changes in markets, changes in services, seeking revenues, changes to the external organization, and changes to the internal organization (Boyne & Walker, 2004; Bryson et al., 2018). Strategic management cannot be evaluated through the intentions expressed by an organization's strategic stance. It must be measured through the evaluation of both the strategic stance

and evidence of change through strategic action (Johnsen, 2015). The combination of strategic stance and strategic action can be observed through performance management processes integrated as part of strategic management (Bryson et al., 2018).

**Best practices.** Although strategic management is a diverse discipline that overlaps several others, several approaches have been assessed as best practices. The strategic activities of an organization take multiple cycles of deployment to facilitate organization and individual learning to make them efficient (Ciobanica, 2014; Coffey, 2013). Previous studies on international practices reveal that 3 to 4 years of learning are required to effectively develop and deploy a constructive strategy (Ciobanica, 2014). Communities of practice are beneficial to organizational learning during the deployment of strategy (Schmidt, 2015). During that period of learning, participants hopefully realize the best practices of utilizing a collaborative approach, seeking opportunities to innovate and integrating the elements of the strategic management system effectively.

The collaborative approach is based on the principles and concepts from social network analysis and stakeholder management (Favoreu et al., 2016). The social nature of strategic management lends itself to the exchanges and interactions between networks of individuals and groups (Axelsson, 2016; Favoreu et al., 2016). The collaborative approach to strategic management is a structured process that facilitates the development, evaluation, and implementation of collective strategies or solutions (Favoreu et al., 2016). Collaborative approaches to strategy have demonstrated success in both the private and public sectors. This is partly due to the networks engaging in mutual learning, shared innovation, and shared experimentation (Favoreu et al., 2016). Effective models of

strategic management include as many employees as possible in the organization's strategic activities (Ciobanica, 2014). Collaborative relationships in strategic management require flexibility and soft management skills. Tools and techniques including benchmarking, balanced scorecard, total quality management, and other analytical techniques support the development of collective strategies (Axelsson, 2016; Williams & Lewis, 2008).

Integrating the search for opportunities for innovation is important to the practice of strategic management. Innovation can have an immediate impact on the competitive position of an organization (Horn & Brem, 2012; Kohl, Orth, Riebartsch, & Hecklau, 2016). The practice of innovating or searching for opportunities is intended to identify new ideas for businesses and is often referred to as creativity (Soloducho-Pelc, 2015). Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie (2017) describe innovation as one of five strategic drivers of high-growth organizations. An organization's strategic management should facilitate the identification of opportunities and innovation, that allow the firm to be unique. Strategic management should not just seek to emulate the practices of other successful firms (Ciobanica, 2014). Moreover, to facilitate innovation, an organization must have a systematic approach to gathering the intelligence on how the competition acts and what results the competition achieves (Ciobanica, 2014; Kohl et al., 2016). Intelligence is a backward-looking process to describe and evaluate events, followed by a forward-looking process to predict future events. Foresight is a discipline that assists organizations in identifying and examining the signals about the future (Schmidt, 2015). The use of both intelligence and foresight assist organizations in planning for the future.

Fully integrating the multiple components of strategic management is the best practice. The strategic management system should consist of integrated strategy development activities, performance management activities, sustainability and lifecycle management processes, quality management processes, and evaluation and audit procedures (Kohl et al., 2016). The strategic management system should accomplish the functional requirements of performance assessment, gap analysis, action planning, monitoring and reporting, and knowledge management. The integrated system should also fulfill the general requirements of general validity, completeness, simplicity, transparency, and practicality (Kohl et al., 2016). Strategic planning and performance measurement are important to be integrated. Strategic planning activities should process information in a manner that provides the foundation for performance measurement. Performance measurement data can also inform future cycles of strategic planning. Inadequate strategic planning hampers the successful utilization of performance measurement (Balaboniene & Vecerskiene, 2015; Hall, 2017). Therefore, the need for organizations to allow for multiple cycles of learning from their strategic management system exists.

The best practices discussed in this section require specific conditions to support their applicability to the public sector. Administrative autonomy, performance-based budgets, and market-like conditions increase the likelihood of conventional strategic management theories' application to public sector organizations (Hansen & Ferlie, 2016). These factors will be examined later in this chapter.

## **Political Influence**

The roles of politicians versus administrative staff have been extensively studied and debated by scholars. Influence is the modification of an actor's behavior due to the behavior of another actor or group. Political influence is the application of influence by a political actor on another actor, that results in a modified decision (Arts & Verschuren, 1999, Bello & Spano, 2015). The modification of the decision may result from the mere actions, thoughts, or presence of the influencer. The influencer does not need to actually intervene in the decision-making process (Arts & Verschuren, 1999). This concept of political influence is illustrated in the relationship between politicians and career administrators who lead public sector organizations.

The politics-administration dichotomy is a frequently used and formally accepted model throughout the world, including the United States of America (Bello & Spano, 2015; Rosser & Mavrot, 2017). The politics-administration dichotomy is the separation of politics and administrative state in the provision of government. In this context, the term dichotomy implies that politics and administration are intended to be mutually exclusive. However, scholars have disagreed if the distinction is between the legislative branch and executive branch or political superiors and administrative subordinates (Rosser & Mavrot, 2017). For the purposes of the present study, political influence includes the influences on career bureaucrats (administrators) by the elected members of the legislative and executive branches, as well as political superiors (appointed administrators).

Public sector organizations tend to have authority concentrated with either external bodies or at the top of the organization. This is especially true for personnel matters (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). At each level of government, most employees are protected by merit-based personnel systems. The merit system principles were introduced into title 5 of the United States Code by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (OPM, 2018). The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 protects federal employees from unethical treatment, including personal favoritism, arbitrary action, and coercion for political purposes (PL 95-454, 1978). The protections of merit-based systems increase the likelihood of influence being used, instead of authority, to manage public sector organizations (Johnsen, 2015).

Bureaucratic autonomy, also known as administrative autonomy, is a relevant concept to the present study on political influence. Movements such as new public management and new political governance encourage the empowerment of career bureaucrats through autonomy and accountability (Bello & Spano, 2015). Bureaucratic autonomy is the ability of public sector organizations to act according to their own intentions despite the wishes of politicians (Walters, 2013). Bello and Spano (2015) suggested career bureaucrats feel that decision-making processes and the setting of action plans are influenced by politicians. Further, they also propose that career bureaucrats also perceive that political interference limits their autonomy.

Some public sector organizations are created with higher levels of autonomy, such as the USPS, as discussed earlier. At the state and municipal level, similar authorities exist, such as the authorities created in many states to collect tolls on highways. These



agencies usually have greater control over their own budgeting and decision-making processes. However, public sector organizations with higher levels of autonomy may still be subjected to political influence. It occurs through governing boards in addition to the influence of other political actors (O'Connell, 2014; Rutherford & Lozano, 2018). The governing boards in the public sector are often appointed by chief executives or other elected officials.

**Political actors and instruments.** The public sector is executed by a combination of groups, including career employees, elected officials, and individuals appointed by the elected officials. The political actors include career bureaucrats, elected and appointed officials, and appointed administrators (Bertelli, 2015; Furlong, 1998; Tama, 2017). Each of these groups has the potential to influence the strategic management of the public sector, using a variety of instruments.

The relationships between the groups of political actors involve negotiations, accommodations, favors, conflict, and alliances. (Boateng & Cox, 2016; Fu, 2012; Furlong, 1998). Municipal and state governments have developed targeted reforms to improve the collaboration between career bureaucrats and political appointees. Career bureaucrats have high levels of commitment to their organizations; however, they have limited trust in political appointees (Boateng & Cox, 2016). Despite their lack of trust, public sector leaders conduct strategic management activities for both performance and political reasons (Tama, 2018).

Strategy formulation in political contexts usually follow a bottom-up approach: issues of strategic importance are introduced; interested actors lobby and exert pressure

on the political actors to address the issues; key issues gain enough attention and support from the political actors, and finally solutions are introduced in the form of public policy (Favoreu et al., 2016). While public policy-making and strategic planning are closely interconnected, they are not the same. Policy-making results in the statement of the principles intended to influence and outline political protocol and decision-making. Strategic planning, as discussed earlier, is a process of defining the future direction of an organization regarding the objectives and strategies to achieve them (Schmidt, 2015). The political approaches to strategy formulation result in unstructured, discontinuous, and incremental change. The political management of public sector organizations produces ill-defined strategies, fosters ambiguity, fails to garner the commitment from career bureaucrats, and are mostly clandestine (Favoreu et al., 2016).

Career bureaucrat responsibilities generally include achieving their organization's legislated purpose, developing strategies to achieve that purpose, establishing the criteria for success, influencing public opinion, and managing and improving their organizations (Bello & Spano, 2015). They are typically professionals in their specialties and unbiased by politics in their work and work to execute the programs and policies formulated by political leaders (Ugaddan & Parks, 2017). Therefore, career bureaucrats face unique leadership challenges. Leadership in their environment requires the ability to address complex public policy issues and use of negotiation and conflict resolution to balance political interests and values (Fu, 2012; Ugaddan & Parks, 2017).

The legislative branch is responsible for defining the interaction between the executive and legislative branches by promulgating laws, regulations, and policies

(Rosser & Mavrot, 2017). The president heads the executive branch at the federal level, governors at the state level, and mayors or executives at the municipal level. The chief executive has multiple mechanisms to influence the bureaucracy, including the appointment and removal of administrators, budgeting, the reorganization of organizations, and through executive orders (Furlong, 1998; Kim, 2015). The judicial branch has the limited ability to influence public sector organization's actions through the judicial review process, procedural rulings on the organization's ability to make decisions, and setting judicial deadlines for the organization to complete an action (Furlong, 1998).

Although politicians have the ability to influence the bureaucracy, it is conceivable that career bureaucrats exert their own influence on the bureaucracy. Career bureaucrats have the advantage of information asymmetry. They generally have more information and expertise on policy issues than elected officials and can utilize that advantage to lead the politicians to make the decisions they desire (Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen, & Serritzlew, 2014; Berry & Gersen, 2017). However, Baekgaard et al. (2014) concluded empirical evidence that politician preferences have a greater influence on salient policy than career bureaucrat preferences. Those findings suggest political influences on a public sector organization's strategic management may be more responsible for change than career bureaucrat actions.

**Political instruments.** A level of shared authority usually exists over public sector organizations by the executive and legislative branches (Bello & Spano, 2015; Furlong, 1998). Public sector organizations are generally led by administrators who are

appointed by the chief executive and in many cases approved with the consent of the legislative branch. Governments around the world have been experiencing an increase in the influence on administrators by politicians (Bello & Spano, 2015; MacDonald & McGrath, 2016). Each of the three branches of the government has several political instruments that may be used to influence public sector organizations.

**Legislative branch.** The legislative branch exerts influence over public sector organizations through controls, including statutory changes, the appropriation process, and oversight hearings. The oversight by the legislative branch can be categorized as informal and formal. Informal methods include telephone calls, private meetings, and other contacts that do not create a public record. Formal methods include the promulgation of legislation, committee hearings, and other formal meetings (Furlong, 1998; MacDonald & McGrath, 2016). Legislatures use these tools at the federal, state, and municipal levels (Boehmke & Shipan, 2015). The legislative branch also exercises influence through procedural requirements, such as establishing reporting requirements, specifying the agency structure, and developing the procedural requirements (Bjornholt & Larsen, 2014; Fu, 2012; Furlong, 1998; MacDonald & McGrath, 2016). An example of these requirements includes the performance management programs to hold career bureaucrats accountable, such as the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA) at the federal level and managing for results at the state level (Bello & Spano, 2015). Performance measures may be used by politicians to explicitly communicate their priorities to the career bureaucrats who are responsible for achieving them (Bjornholt & Larsen, 2014). Legislators have the opportunity to use performance measures as a tool for

the internal control of organizations by ensuring that the organizational behaviors are aligned with the stated public goals. Performance results can also be used to reward the outstanding performance and sanction the poor performance of the implementing career bureaucrats (Bjornholt & Larsen, 2014). Although these characteristics may seem similar to the performance measurement in the private sector, a major difference is the lack of autonomy in the public sector. Most public sector organizations rely on appropriations from the same legislators to fund the execution of their programs and strategies (Bello & Spano, 2015; Bjornholt & Larsen, 2014). Therefore, the legislators have the ability to communicate their priorities through performance measures and only fund the strategies they support. This use of performance measurement has the potential to serve as a political instrument that elected officials and appointed administrators can use to influence the strategic decisions made by career bureaucrats.

The legislative branch, at all levels of government, uses committee hearings to influence public sector organizations. Oversight hearings exert both formal and informal influence over career bureaucrats. Individual legislators and their staffs may informally contact career bureaucrats before hearings, in addition to the formal interactions that take place during the hearing (Bello & Spano, 2015; MacDonald & McGrath, 2016). Hearings are primarily instruments utilized to challenge and change policy. However, the use of hearings differs in nature between unified control and divided government. When the government is unified, meaning the same party controls the legislature as the chief executive, oversight hearings are more likely to focus on substantial policymaking. When the government is divided, the hearings are more likely to be purely political in nature

(MacDonald & McGrath, 2016). Committee hearings, therefore, highlight the intersection between the role of the legislature and the role of the chief executive in managing the bureaucracy.

**Executive branch.** The president, governors, and mayors have significant instruments to influence the public sector. These chief executives typically have the authority to appoint administrators to lead government agencies and board members to govern more autonomous organizations. This appointment power allows for the installation of leaders of career bureaucrats who are ideologically aligned with the chief executive (Bello & Spano, 2015; Berry & Gersen, 2017; Kim, 2015; Rogowski, 2016). Agency packing is an instrument by which a chief executive adjusts the design of an agency to place numerous appointees in senior leadership positions (Berry & Gersen, 2017). This instrument makes it possible for a chief executive to replace an agency leader who makes decisions aligned with the best interests of the organization and its stakeholders with one who is more aligned with the chief executive's preferences.

Chief executives typically have approval power over agencies' guiding documents such as plans and budgets (Kim, 2015). The control of these documents creates the potential for influence over strategic decisions. Ex-ante influences include the ability to draft the initial budget proposal (Berry & Gersen, 2017). For example, a chief executive can simply not include an agency's funding priority in the budget. Ex post influences include the ability to control the actual disbursement of the budget regardless of legislative appropriation (Berry & Gersen, 2017). For example, a chief executive can ignore a legislative earmark. Chief executives typically have the ability not to spend

funds that are approved by the legislature (Berry & Gersen, 2017). These influences may allow chief executives to influence the strategic management of public sector organizations through the control of their resources.

A major instrument of chief executives is the directive or executive order.

Directives and executive orders allow chief executives to take unilateral action on policy decisions (Chiou & Rothenberg, 2016; Gitterman, 2012; Watts, 2016). Executive orders are used to manage the executive branch and can cause administrative agencies to take specific actions. The orders can be directed at all administrative agencies or specific agencies (National Archive and Records Administration, 2018). Executive orders can supersede the decision-making process of administrative agencies (Chiou & Rothenberg, 2016; Watts, 2016). For example, President Obama issued executive order 13467 in January 2017. The order amended the civil service rules for all federal employees. The changes made by the executive order would have normally resulted from the rule-making within the Office of Personnel Management (Federal Register, 2017). More than 900 executive orders have been issued by the U.S. presidents between 1994 and 2018. The use of executive orders may clearly cause career bureaucrats to modify their actions or take an action they would not have otherwise taken.

Public sector procurement is also subject to political influence from the executive branch. Chief executives have relied on purchasing rules and executive orders to establish policies that influence spending decisions (Gitterman, 2013; Krause & Melusky, 2012). Those policies have been used over time to influence public policy in areas such as equal employment opportunity, disadvantaged businesses, the environment, and labor relations

(Gitterman, 2013). For example, a governor or the president can establish rules that require a minimum percentage of work be allocated to veteran-owned or minority-owned businesses. The execution of strategy in the public sector often relies on the procurement of services and goods (Ciobanica, 2014). The ability of chief executives to influence procurement in the public sector potentially increases their influence over the strategic management of public sector organizations.

Chief executives typically have authority over agency rule-making and enforcement actions. At the federal level, presidents have issued executive orders to agencies requiring the rule-making efforts to be reviewed and receive clearance from the offices in the White House. These reviews allow the president to modify, delay, or deny the rule-making efforts initiated by public sector organizations (Berry & Gersen, 2017; Kim, 2015). This instrument makes it possible for a chief executive to overrule a career bureaucrat who may be acting in the best interest of the organization and its stakeholders.

### **Strategic Management in the Public Sector**

The use of strategic planning in the public sector grew in both popularity and need in the early 1990s. Social and financial pressures require public sector organizations to focus on structuring to operate efficiently towards attaining clear priorities and objectives. The GPRA in the U. S., the Local Government Modernization Agenda (LGMA) in England, and the Loi Organique relative aux Lois de Finances (LOLF) in France each required public sector organizations to conduct strategic management activities, such as strategic planning, performance management, and performance-based budgeting. The purposes of strategic management in the public sector include goal



alignment, effectiveness, and continuity of effort (Bryson et al., 2018; Favoreu et al., 2016).

GPRA was enacted in 1993 and required U.S. federal agencies to engage stakeholders, including the Congress, to develop mission statements, four-year strategic plans, and annual performance goals. It also mandated performance measurement to evaluate their performance towards those goals (Ho, 2007; Moynihan & Kroll, 2016). GPRA was reaffirmed and modernized through the GPRA Modernization Act in 2010. The modernization act expanded the strategic planning horizon to 5 years and established chief operating officers and performance improvement officers in each agency. The Modernization Act also established cross-agency goals under a government-wide plan managed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) (Moynihan & Kroll, 2016). U.S. states followed the federal government's lead. By the mid-2000s, 33 states had formal laws or statutes requiring performance management, and the remaining 17 had some type of administrative requirement (Moynihan, 2012).

Although legislation and policies have been developed to require many public sector organizations to execute strategic management activities, there are still organizational leaders that initiate those programs on their own. Researchers including Kroll and Moynihan (2015) and Tama (2018) unveiled that leaders are more committed to strategic planning activities they have initiated compared to the ones required by legislation. Further, their commitment can aid the planning process by communicating with other participants to take the process seriously (Tama, 2018). Legislations and policies that require strategic management often contain specific requirements intended to

meet the needs of political actors, not the leaders of the organization conducting the planning (Moynihan & Kroll, 2016; Tama, 2018). These requirements often include time constraints, specific topics to be addressed, and the production of reports for public consumption. Such types of requirements can distract leaders from addressing the important strategic issues faced by organizations and are less likely to address the specific needs of the organizations' leaders (Tama, 2018). However, strategic management mandates have been found to support the adoption of best practices by public sector organizations (Bourdeaux & Chikoto, 2008; Tama, 2018). Tama (2018) recommends the development of legal mandates that not only require strategic management but also give public sector organizations the discretion to execute it in a manner that meets their needs.

Strategic management in the public sector is characterized by high levels of collaboration. Most public problems require collaboration to develop solutions; therefore, most public sector organizations collaborate with other institutions to execute their missions (Lee, McGuire, & Kim, 2018; Tama, 2018). The strategic planning process can be positively influenced through the engagement of multiple stakeholders. The inclusion of multiple stakeholders with varying types of inputs increases the likelihood of the planning process actually guiding the leaders to achieve the outcomes (Lee et al., 2018). Previous studies have indicated that external stakeholder participation in the development of an agency's plans increases the likelihood of them supporting a public sector organizations' plans (Tama, 2018). These findings suggest public sector organizations

and their leaders should actively collaborate with their key stakeholders throughout their planning efforts.

Public sector strategic management is sometimes motivated and influenced by politics. Van der Voet (2016) argues that future research on public sector organizational change should focus on the organizational environment, that is complex and political. The strong support from political actors can assist in strategic planning by providing agency leaders with the autonomy, flexibility, and resources necessary to plan effectively (Tama, 2018; Yesilkagit & van Thiel, 2008). Public sector organizations with weak support from political actors may engage in strategic planning to demonstrate to external stakeholders that they are worthy of their support. In instances where political actors have expressed concerns over an agency's performance, strategic planning may be used to show the management's commitment to correcting their shortcomings (Tama, 2018).

### **Strategic Management in Maryland**

Strategic management is required by legislation in the State of Maryland. MFR is an initiative launched in July 1997 that requires strategic planning by executive branch departments (Meyers, 2011). The initiative was codified into Maryland law 7 years later in July 2004. The law designated the Maryland DBM as the lead agency for managing the MFR process and the development of a state-wide comprehensive plan.

Maryland's MFR guidebook describes the program as a framework for planning, accountability, process analysis, and budgeting. It further explains that the government is required to anticipate and plan for future requirements, measure the performance in relation to the desired results, make policy decisions that are effective, and use the results

to improve the performance (DBM, 2017). MFR integrated strategic planning with the State's budget process, resulting in performance-based budgeting. Maryland's executive agencies are required to submit their visions, missions, goals, objectives, performance measures, and strategies as part of their annual budget submission (DBM, 2017; Meyers, 2011).

The state-wide comprehensive plan communicates the governor's goals and contains the objectives, performance measures, and strategies from across the executive branch that are aligned with those goals (Meyers, 2011). In addition to the state-wide comprehensive plan, DBM is required to submit an annual report to Maryland's Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and the House Appropriations Committee. The annual report summarizes the State's progress in achieving the governor's goals (DBM, 2017). The state-wide comprehensive plan and the associated performance report provide the governor and the legislature with the potential for both ex-post and ex-ante influences. The governor has the opportunity to influence agency goals, objectives, and strategies through the development of the state-wide plan. Further, the governor may influence strategy execution through the budgeting and procurement processes.

The State of Maryland has an administrative body that oversees the expenditure of major capital appropriations known as the Board of Public Works (BPW). The BPW comprises the governor, treasurer, and comptroller (BPW, n.d.). All the three members are elected officials. The BPW is responsible for the development and adoption of procurement regulations, approval of contracts exceeding \$200,000, expenditure of general obligation bond funds, and approval of real estate transactions. Further, the BPW

has the power to bar vendors from participating in the State's procurement process due to unethical behavior (BPW, n.d.). The BPW provides additional opportunities to political actors to influence the strategic management of Maryland's agencies through formal and informal methods.

In 2015, the Governor's Office of Performance Improvement was established under the Code of Maryland Regulations. The objectives of the office include the following:

- Providing data to policymakers about the cost-effectiveness and efficacy of services
- Increasing the responsiveness and customer service levels of government agencies
- Tracking and assessing the progress of agencies in meeting strategic goals
- Promoting business process improvement strategies to increase the efficiency and responsiveness of agencies (COMAR Sec 01.01.2015.26)

The Governor's Office of Performance Improvement is staffed entirely by political appointees. The executive order that established the office directed all of Maryland's agencies, commissions, boards, and departments to cooperate with the office. Further, each agency head and department secretary are directed to meet with and address the questions from the office (COMAR Sec 01.01.2015.26).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the multitude of research works on strategic management, there remain gaps in the pertinent collective body of knowledge. This literature review has contrasted

the differences in the motives for using strategic management and role politics plays.

Several authors have argued the need to specifically study the differences in the application of strategic management in the public sector compared to the private sector.

The legislative and administrative requirements for public sector strategic management were discussed earlier in this review. Hansen and Ferlie (2016) have pointed out the need for further research on how public sector organizations actually behave strategically. Strategic management is intended to address the future challenges in an organization's environment (Bao, 2015; Soloducho-Pelc, 2015; Storchevoi, 2015). As summarized in this literature review, legislative and administrative requirements can distract leaders from addressing the important strategic issues faced by the organization (Tama, 2018). Johnsen (2015) and Mazouz et al. (2016) support the need for research in this area. Johnsen (2015) has differentiated between strategic planning and strategic thinking and highlighted the lack of research on the practice of strategic thinking by public sector organizations. It is unclear if strategic thinking and strategic management tools have been sufficiently adapted to the public sector to be effective (Mazouz et al., 2016). This is further supported by Lee and Kim (2012) who have indicated that the level of strategic planning capacity greatly differs amongst government agencies. Many research studies have focused on public sector results but have not clearly concluded that strategic management improves organizational performance (Favoreu et al., 2016; Poister, 2010).

There is little published research on the impact of complex political environments on public sector strategic management. As it has been outlined throughout the literature

review, strategic management requires extensive interaction and collaboration between public sector organization stakeholders (Johnsen, 2015; Powell, 2014). Van der Voet (2016) has argued that future research should focus on the public sector organizational environment, that is complex and political. Mazouz et al. (2016) have explained the need to gain an understanding of how public policy development incorporates the synthesis of the resources required, services provided, and outcomes of public policy. However, many researchers have attempted to simplify these concepts and disregard the relationship between these three elements in their research (Mazouz et al., 2016). Johnsen (2015) concluded there is a need for further research on the differences between strategizing and policy-making, as well as the role played by elected officials in strategic management. As outlined earlier in this review, elected officials influence public sector organizations' autonomy, legal authority, and resources (Mazouz et al., 2016).

There is little published research that contributes to our collective understanding of human interaction in the execution of strategic management. Powell (2014) concluded there is a need for further research on human behavior and moral responsibility in strategic management. Strategic management research is primarily impersonal; however, the development and execution of strategy are mostly personal. Strategic management focuses on human problems such as problem-solving, goal-setting, decision-making, and strategizing. However, the empirical research in management is primarily concerned with hypothesis testing, measurement, and physical theories (Powell, 2014).

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Strategic management in the public sector has been extensively studied since its widespread adoption in the 1980s. Researchers, including Hansen and Ferlie (2016), Johnsen (2015), Lee and Kim (2012), and Van der Voet (2016), have evaluated the use of strategic management and its components by public sector organizations. Their research provides an understanding of the discipline, including its history, applicability, and the best practices in the public sector.

The political influence of the bureaucracy has also been studied extensively for more than a century. Researchers, including Bello and Spano (2015), Rosser and Mavrot (2017), Tama (2017, 2018), and Walters (2013), have examined the methods and approaches used by political actors in their attempt to further their agendas. Despite significant research on the political influences in the public sector, there still exist gaps in the pertinent collective body of knowledge. The research reviewed in this chapter outlines the knowledge gained since strategic management has become a widely utilized practice in the public sector. However, further understanding of the political influences in public sector strategic management is essential to understand its effective execution (Baskarada & Hanlon, 2017; Tama, 2018).

The conceptual framework conveyed in this chapter synthesizes the stakeholder theory and the economic theory of the firm. It is intended to facilitate the study of the specific political influences exerted on the public sector employees engaged in the strategic management of their organizations. The conceptual framework reflects the



complexity of balancing stakeholder demands with the economic challenges of the public sector.

In the following chapter, I discuss the methodological aspects of the qualitative phenomenological study. In Chapters 4, I summarize the data collected and the findings from that data. Chapter 5 contains the study's conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify and report the lived experiences of public sector employees who were subjected to political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in Maryland. The findings from the present study address research gaps on the role political environments play in public sector strategic management and how the human interactions in such environments impact the execution of strategies (Johnsen, 2015; Powell, 2014). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method described by Giorgi (2009) was used to address the overarching research question and fulfill the purpose of the study. This chapter of the study contains information on the research methodology. It provides descriptions of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the instrumentation used, the process of participant selection, data collection methods, and data analysis. The chapter also outlines the ethical guidelines that were adhered to and the ethical procedures that were used to ensure the study's validity and reliability.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

A descriptive phenomenological design was selected for the present study. The central research question was "What are the lived experiences of public sector employees who encounter political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in the State of Maryland?" The results of this qualitative phenomenological study may add to the understanding of how political influences are experienced by public sector employees engaged in the strategic management of their organizations.

Phenomenological research is used to gain a rich understanding of how a phenomenon is experienced and is not concerned with quantifying or generalizing (Vagle, 2018). Several researchers have built on Husserl's original work and diversified phenomenology for research use (Giorgi, 2012; Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017; Vagle, 2018). Interpretive phenomenology is the most popular (Giorgi et al., 2017), but I used the descriptive phenomenological psychological method as described by Giorgi (2009) for the present study. The descriptive phenomenological psychological method is specific to human consciousness, meaning it can be used to study human behavior (Giorgi, 2012). Phenomenological methods typically have three major steps: the description of the phenomenon, phenomenological psychological reduction, and seeking the essence of the experience (Giorgi et al., 2017). The descriptive phenomenological method has five steps. With a focus on the whole person, the participants' descriptions provide the raw data that is later analyzed by the researcher, which may prevent potential bias (Giorgi, 2009).

Phenomenology is just one of several qualitative research designs. Narrative research, grounded theory, case studies, and participatory action research are other qualitative designs (Creswell et al., 2007). Narrative research involves the study of written or spoken text that gives an account of an event or series of events experienced by an individual or small group. It is best used when detailed accounts or stories can help the researcher understand the problem being studied (Creswell et al., 2007). This approach was not selected because it would not have provided an understanding of the lived experiences shared by the engaged public sector employees who experienced political

influence. Grounded theory requires the researcher to develop a theory to explain the experiences of a large number of participants and is best used where the existing theories to explain problems are inadequate or nonexistent (Creswell et al., 2007). Because there are many theories to explain the political influence in the public sector, this design was not selected. Case study research is used to examine problems or phenomena by focusing on individual or multiple cases as well as multiple data sources. Case study designs are best used when a phenomenon or problem can be bound by a place or time (Creswell et al., 2007). However, the present study was focused on the details of the shared lived experiences of public sector employees than the contextual conditions that factor into a case study. Participant action research is used by researchers to produce social change where the participants and researcher are engaged in a collaborative process. The design is best used when a social or community issue needs to be studied to encourage change (Creswell et al., 2007). This design was not chosen because it was not aligned with the problem addressed in the present study and was not likely to lead to a detailed understanding of the shared lived experiences of the participants.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I used a qualitative methodology, which involved exploring phenomena rather than testing hypotheses (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research comprises interpretive activities where a researcher directly observes and engages with people. Such research is focused on people, their experiences, and the context in which the experiences take place (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As the researcher for this study, I served as the observer and analyst. The study design required me to establish effective relationships with the

participants to facilitate productive interviews because in a descriptive phenomenological design the data is provided by the participants. The researcher observes the participants as they describe their lived experiences in their own words (Giorgi et al., 2017). In the phenomenological reduction step, my observations and field notes played an important role (Giorgi, 2009). As the researcher, I was also responsible for the trustworthiness of the study. Therefore, I acknowledge my positionality and used bracketing to mitigate its impact on data collection (see O'Halloran et al., 2018). Bracketing is discussed in further detail in the Data Collection Plan section of this chapter. Trustworthiness is discussed as a separate section later in this chapter.

I was also responsible for identifying the potential participants, recruiting them to participate in the study, and conducting the five steps in the descriptive phenomenological psychological method (see Giorgi et al., 2017). After collecting the participants' descriptions through interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim. In Step 1, I read the transcription to gain an overall sense of the situation. In Step 2, I assumed the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude. In Step 3, I used scientific phenomenological reduction to delineate the participants' descriptions into meaning units. In Step 4, I transformed the participants' actual words into expressions that highlighted the psychological meanings described by the participants. In the final step, I expressed the psychological structure of the experience using the highlights created in Step 4 (Giorgi et al., 2017).

### **Data Collection Plan**

This section outlines the plan that was followed during the study. It contains information on the selection and recruitment of participants, instrumentation, field test procedures, data collection, and data analysis. The data collection plan explains how the descriptive phenomenological design was implemented to fulfill the study's purpose and address the research question.

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

The descriptive phenomenological design requires purposeful sampling to identify the participants who have experienced the phenomenon being examined by the researcher (O'Halloran et al., 2018). Phenomenological research requires in-depth interviews to document and describe the experiences lived by the participants (Creswell et al., 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). The researcher's focus should be placed on the quality of the data over the quantity of the data. The size of the sample is evaluated by the quality and completeness of the information conveyed by the participants (O'Halloran et al., 2018).

Qualitative research, including phenomenological design, does not rely on large samples sizes to maintain the data integrity. However, data saturation is critical to ensuring adequate data in qualitative research, because it is the point where additional data no longer provides new information (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Research has suggested a plan to interview five to 25 individuals (Creswell et al., 2007) and that typical phenomenological studies have samples that range from one to 10 participants (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007). Maryland's state government is a large organization

with over 45,000 full-time employees. Approximately 16,500 of those employees serve in management or executive service positions (DBM, 2017). As the population of the potential participants is large, there may be several hundred individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest to the present study.

The plan to collect data was to use open-ended questions in the semistructured interviews of 20 participants or until data saturation was achieved (see Creswell et al., 2007; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The determination to use 20 participants was based on previous research recommendations (Creswell et al., 2007; Giorgi, 2009). A power analysis was not conducted, as data saturation was more important than generalizable results to a larger population (see Creswell et al., 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). After conducting 12 interviews, I produced a list of initial themes. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm that no new themes emerged. No additional themes emerged, therefore data saturation was achieved with a final sample of 15.

The participants consisted of managers and senior leaders who regularly participated in at least one of the state agencies' strategic management activities. The following criteria was met by each participants in the study: (a) the participants were either a current employee of Maryland or separated from the state service in the past 4 years; (b) the participants were regular participants in at least one of their organization's strategic management activities; (c) the participants served in their current positions for more than 1 year at the time of their interview; and (d) the participants did not secure their positions through a political appointment. Strategic management activities included strategic planning, performance management, budget development, policy development,

and organizational development. The term *political appointment* in the present study referred to the appointment of anyone who did not participate in any of Maryland State Government's competitive hiring processes.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The participants of the present study were recruited from a pool of current and recently separated Maryland State Government employees. The ideal participants served in the following types of positions in their agencies: program managers, department managers, deputy directors, directors, chief financial officers, chief administrative officers, and chief operations officers. I have professional relationships with hundreds of Maryland State Government employees from my previous 20 years of service in Maryland as well as previous consulting work. E-mails were sent to five potential participants listed as their agency's MFR coordinator with whom I have also established relationships. Maryland's list of MFR coordinators is publicly available on the DBM website. I also posted an announcement of my research on LinkedIn to garner the interest of the Maryland State Government employees in my network. Snowball sampling was planned to gain additional participants until data saturation was achieved; however, it was not used because there were more volunteers than necessary (see Griffith, Morris, & Thakar, 2016).

### **Instrumentation**

The instrumentation for the present study included an interview protocol, the written field notes taken during interviews, and the audio-recordings of interviews. The



interview protocol was field tested before its employment. The procedures for the field test will be discussed in a subsequent section.

**Interviews.** In-depth semistructured interviews were the primary data collection instrument. It is the responsibility of the researcher using descriptive phenomenology to allow the participants to fully present their experiences and reveal their consciousness (O'Halloran et al., 2018). Bracketing is used in phenomenology throughout the data collection process, which is a self-reflective process used by the researcher to identify and set aside their assumptions and a priori knowledge about the phenomenon being studied. The process is intended not to get the researcher to abandon preexisting thoughts and perspectives but to focus openly on the participants' accounts and descriptions of their lived experiences (Giorgi, 2009; O'Halloran et al., 2018; Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007).

All interviews followed the interview protocol. The interview protocol consisted of a set of questions that each participant was asked; however, it allowed for both elaboration by the participants and follow-up questions to facilitate the gathering of a full account of their experience. Descriptive phenomenology is different from other qualitative designs, as it relies on descriptions from the participants as opposed to the researchers themselves. The researcher must work to get the participants to carefully and precisely describe their lived experiences while allowing them to reflect on their consciousness (Giorgi et al., 2017). The interview protocol accounted for these requirements and the associated time commitments.

Political influence and strategic management are both complex phenomena. Participants required lengthy interview sessions to provide the level of details necessary to address the purpose of the present study. Each participant was asked to allow 60 minutes for the interview. The participants were asked if they were willing to set aside an additional 30–45 minutes for a follow-up interview to provide clarifications to any of the responses.

All the initial interviews were conducted in person. Face-to-face interviews facilitate synchronous communication both in time and location. This allows the researcher to take advantage of social cues and both parties to react immediately to what the other says and does (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Follow-up interviews were not necessary. The interviews were conducted at a time and location that were both convenient to and safe for the participants such as a conference room or an office at the participant's workplace or a local coffee shop. As the interviewer, I took written notes in addition to audio-recording each interview.

**Field notes.** Field notes were compiled during and following the interviews to gather the observations that cannot be captured by the audio-recording device. For example, participants articulated experiences that they did not know the formal or technical name of. Notes were taken of what I thought the participant was describing for later confirmation. Notes were also composed to describe nonverbal actions that the participant made and verbal statements that include sarcasm.

**Supporting documentation.** DBM publishes each agency's budget request as well as their MFR document on its website. The current year's and previous years'

submissions are openly available to the public. Those documents were available to provide additional insight into the statements made by the participants. These documents are official government records and were used to assist the participants in recalling specific events.

### **Procedures for Field Test**

The interview protocol was field tested to ensure its alignment with the study's purpose and its ability to examine the phenomenon of political influence. A draft interview protocol was developed (see Appendix A) that was intended to meet those requirements. A panel of experts was asked to review the interview protocol to suggest modifications that would elicit responses to the central research question presented in Chapter 1. The panel was composed of three experts; all were methodological experts in phenomenology and one was also an expert in strategic management. The feedback from the panel of experts was used to revise the interview protocol as necessary to align with the study's purpose.

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

The central research question of this study was answered by the semistructured interviews of the participants. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol (see Appendix A). The interviews were audio-recorded to improve the capturing of the participants' statements and reduce physical note-taking during the interview sessions. A secondary audio-recorder was available during each interview in case the primary one failed.

Once each participant confirmed their intent to participate in the study, I made the necessary arrangements for the interview, including scheduling the time and location and providing a preview of the informed consent documents. Each interview was anticipated to take 45 to 60 minutes. That period included the time necessary to answer any final questions about informed consent and obtain the participant's signature on the consent form. The anticipated time was included in the implied consent form and discussed with each participant during the scheduling of the interview. The interview duration was confirmed during the pilot testing of the interview protocol. The recruited participants were given a 4-week period to schedule their interviews. Due to holidays during the data collection period, an additional week was added to the interview period. The interviews were confirmed via email and, where possible, a calendar invite for Microsoft Outlook or Google calendar. Multiple interviews were scheduled on the same day where possible to minimize the overall data collection period and trips to Maryland.

The initial interviews were all conducted face to face. I met the participants at the time and location agreed upon and obtained their signatures on the implied consent form. Having the participants play a role in the selection of the location increased their comfort during the interview. Potential locations included coffee shops near the participants' offices or residences. Those locations tend to have atmospheres where conversational volumes are appropriate and pose less risk of the participants being overheard by individuals they know (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview protocol (see Appendix A) served as the guide for the interviews and contained both the interview questions as well as the follow-up prompts that I anticipate to be necessary. Each interview was audio-

recorded, and field notes were captured as discussed earlier in this chapter. The ending script from the interview protocol was read verbatim and then the participants were asked if they have any questions for me before I ended the recording. The ending script reminded the participants that I would send them a transcript of their interview for their review within two weeks following the interview.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

A significant action concerning the data analysis occurred before the collection of data. In phenomenological research, the researcher brackets their personal experiences and beliefs and sets them aside (Giorgi, 2009; O'Halloran et al., 2018). Bracketing should take place throughout the entire data collection process, including before, during, and after the interviews (O'Halloran et al., 2018). Bracketing requires the researcher to acknowledge the past experiences, beliefs, and knowledge relevant to the phenomenon being studied. The researcher should ignore their temptation to use those experiences, beliefs, and knowledge during their exploration of the phenomenon. The researcher should attempt to observe, note, and analyze the phenomenon as it is revealed (Giorgi, 2009). Giorgi (2009) argues that in psychology, bracketing requires only an attitudinal shift to focus fully on the present without discarding the past. O'Halloran et al. (2018) have used journaling and reflective memorandums to assist with bracketing. I documented my experiences, beliefs, and knowledge about the research topic in my journal to accomplish this task. Journaling allowed me to explore and acknowledge my consciousness and positionality concerning the research topic. This assisted me in

assuming the attitude of phenomenological reduction, which will be explained later in this section.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. The service provider Rev.com was used to transcribe the interviews. The field notes were typed and manually combined with the transcribed interview. The combined transcripts assisted me in the analysis. Phenomenology requires more than just an analysis of the text, as nonverbal communication is essential to the understanding of speech (Giorgi, 2009). My field notes added such aspects to the transcripts.

**Descriptive phenomenological method data analysis steps.** Giorgi (2009) describes five concrete steps to be followed in the descriptive phenomenological method. I followed the five steps described by Giorgi without exception. The five steps are as follows:

- 1) Read the transcribed description to gain a holistic sense of the phenomenon.

In this step, the researcher reads the entire transcript without attempting to analyze the content (Giorgi, 2009).

- 2) The researcher assumes the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude (Giorgi et al., 2017). Scientific or psychological phenomenological reduction requires the researcher to reduce the participant's descriptions to those specifically related to the phenomenon. Other descriptions are acknowledged as parts of the participant's consciousness but not related to the phenomenon. This attitude is maintained throughout the remaining steps of the data analysis process (Giorgi et al., 2017).

- 3) Meaning units are identified and parsed in the transcript. This step requires the researcher to read the transcript with the goal of identifying the psychological meaning units. Each time a significant change in the meaning unit occurs, a mark such as a slash is made in the transcript (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). The result is that the phenomenon is expressed as a “series of meaning units” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130).
- 4) Transform the participant’s natural statements into expressions that are phenomenologically and psychologically sensitive. This step requires the researcher to convert the participant’s statements into expressions that reflect the psychological dimension (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). Though phenomena are experienced individually and uniquely lived, Giorgi has argued most can be described at the psychological level (Giorgi, 2009).
- 5) The transformed meaning units are used as the basis for describing the overall psychological experience. This overall description may be expressed differently than the original natural statements of the participant due to the phenomenological reduction and transformation to psychological terms (Giorgi et al., 2017).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is evaluated by four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Cope, 2014; Shenton, 2004).

Credibility is related to internal validity and supported by utilizing an accepted research method (Shenton, 2004). A credible study describes phenomena in a way that readers can

recognize. Transferability is related to external validity. It is the ability of the findings from one study to be applied to other situations (Cope, 2014). Dependability is related to data integrity. A dependable study can be repeated and produce the same results (Cope, 2014; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009). A dependable study contains evidence of sufficient quantities of quality data gathered through a sound methodology (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Confirmability is the ability of the qualitative research to convey the experiences of the participants, not the researcher's perspectives (Shenton, 2004). To ensure the trustworthiness of the present study, comprehensive strategies were used to ensure the four criteria are met.

The present study utilized the accepted research method of descriptive phenomenological design. Husserl established phenomenology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thereafter, it has been refined by several researchers over the past century (Giorgi, 2012; Vagle, 2018). As discussed earlier in this chapter, Giorgi (2009) has refined the method further, by addressing the potential bias from the researcher. Using this established method addresses the credibility criteria of trustworthiness.

The transferability of the study is limited to its design and conceptual framework. Phenomenological studies examine the shared lived experiences of a population (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). The results are specific to the lived experiences of the group studied and, therefore, are not transferable. The conceptual framework articulated in Chapter 2 comprises two well-established theories and can be used in further studies to examine the same phenomenon in a different population. The design of the study is also transferable to further studies on different populations.



The dependability of the study is significantly influenced by the data collection methods expressed earlier in this chapter. The semi structured interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. The interviews were conducted utilizing a field-tested interview protocol. The data produced from the interviews are dependable, as the data collection methods are likely to produce the same results if repeated (see Williams & Morrow, 2009). The interview content can be verified through publicly available documents, such as the agencies' managing results submissions as well as strategic plans.

The confirmability of the study is significantly influenced by the data analysis method expressed earlier in this chapter. Bracketing was used to mitigate the potential inclusion of my perspective in the study's results. Bracketing was memorialized in a reflective memorandum and included in the appendices of this study. The descriptive phenomenological approach was executed as described by Giorgi (2009) to encourage the accurate reflection of the participants' experiences in psychological terms. Each participant was provided the transcript of their interview within two weeks of its completion. The participants had one additional week to review the transcript and determine if they wanted to withdraw their consent from the study. Dedoose software was used to assist in the data analysis. These strategies should allow the readers of the study to see the experiences of the participants being conveyed without the influence of my experiences.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The lack of ethical considerations in the past has led to the rise of procedural controls to ensure research ethics in the present. These controls include institutional

review boards (IRBs) and ethics committees (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The present study includes human subjects; therefore, IRB approval was required before data collection began. This section outlines my planning for research ethics.

The recruitment materials of the study provided a brief description of the study and the inclusion criteria of the participants. The volunteers who respond to the recruitment materials received a verbal description of the study from me, an explanation of its purpose, and how and why they were being asked to participate. The present study included semi structured interviews of the Maryland State Government employees involved in the strategic management of their organizations. The intended participants did not fit the description of vulnerable individuals as outlined by Walden University's IRB. Each participant went through the informed consent procedures and signed an informed consent form acknowledging both the understanding of their rights and indicating their willingness to participate in the study. The informed consent form was written in English, as all Maryland State Government documents are published in English. It was reasonable to expect the participants of the present study to be able to both read and speak English, as they are required to publish documents in the same language. The present study used the sample consent form provided by the IRB, and the form was only slightly modified to address the specifics of the present study. The sample form contained the background information, the procedures to be included in the duration of the study, an explanation of the voluntary nature of the study, the risks and benefits of participating in the study, the participant compensation description, the privacy information, and the contact information for the researcher. The consent form was provided to the potential

participants once they agreed to schedule the interview, which provided them time to review its contents before the interview. I contacted the participants 48–72 hours before their scheduled interviews to remind them of the interview appointment and asked if they had questions about the informed consent form. At the scheduled time of the interview, I reviewed the informed consent form with the participants asked them to attest their signature on the form. The informed consent procedures are also briefly covered in the interview protocol (see Appendix A).

The interview protocol reminded the participants of their options to refuse to answer the interview questions and terminate the interview at any time. The participants were reminded that the interview is being recorded and asked if they consent to the recording. At the end of the interview, the participants were reminded that they would have the opportunity to review their interview transcript and withdraw their consent for participation in the study. The participants were reminded that it is not my intention to identify them during the interview. The subjects of the questions were focused on the participants' professional experiences. It was unlikely to solicit descriptions of criminal activities. The interview questions neither asked the participants to identify themselves nor asked them to identify their specific agency or work location. The only identification that took place during the interview was the announcement of the participant's interview number. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and their statements were of the utmost importance.

To protect the identity of the participants, they were only identified by participant number during the recorded interview. The participant names and numbers were

segregated from each other. A roster containing the participants' identification numbers only contains the initials of the participants. The informed consent form contains the participant's full name but not the participant number. The present study had a small number of participants; therefore, this method was manageable. The participant roster and informed consent forms were kept separately. The participant roster is saved on a laptop which requires the use of a common access card for access. The signed copies of the informed consent forms are being kept in a locked file box in my home office. The audio recordings and transcribed interviews are also stored on the common access card-secured laptop. The use of the Dedoose software did not require the identification of the participants. These procedures should mitigate the risk of the intentional or unintentional discovery of the information required to link a participant to their interview. A confidentiality agreement was executed with Rev.com, the service used for the transcription of the interviews.

The participants were provided with the disclosure of my one potential conflict of interest in the informed consent form. I work for an international consulting firm that has operations in Maryland. I disclosed to the participants that I did not represent the firm I work for during the present study, and the data collected was not intended to benefit the firm. I will neither disclose the data collected during the study to the firm nor answer specific questions that violate the participants' confidentiality for anyone.

The data collected during the present study was focused on the lived experiences of the participants engaged in the strategic management of their organizations. The participants were asked about experiences involving political influence. Although

unlikely, it was possible the participants may have experienced some psychological discomfort in the recalling of the professional interactions with elected or appointed officials. No other significant relationship and professional, physical, or legal risks were expected. These risks were mitigated by the informed consent procedures outlined in this section.

### **Summary**

The descriptive phenomenological design as described by Giorgi (2009) was intended to address the central research question of the present study. The design was intended to assist me in capturing and analyzing the lived experiences of participants employed by the State of Maryland. This chapter contains the rationale for using this design, as well as provided a description of the steps that were required to complete the study. The role of the researcher has been explained, as well as how issues of trustworthiness and ethics were addressed. This chapter completed the proposal and provided the information necessary to obtain the permission to move forward with the actual performance of the study. Following the approval of the proposal, I received IRB approval and subsequently began collection of data.

## Chapter 4: Research Findings

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify and report the lived experiences of public sector employees engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in Maryland. The research question for this study addressed the lived experiences of public sector employees who encounter political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations. This chapter contains my summary of the research findings.

### **Setting**

After participants volunteered for the study, I contacted each participant to coordinate a time and location for their interview. The participants were asked to select a location that was convenient for them, provided an environment suitable for conversation, and offered enough privacy to prevent acquaintances from learning of their participation in the study. The interviews with participants took place in the following settings: seven (46.67%) took place in public locations including coffee shops and small restaurants; five (33%) took place at private offices controlled by the participants; one (6.67%) took place in a conference room at a business not affiliated with the participant or me; and at the participant's request, one (6.67%) interview took place at a participant's home. The settings were all conducive to the conversational nature of the interviews. None of the interviews were interrupted by nonparticipants.

### **Demographics**

The study's participants shared the experience of participating in the strategic management of Maryland State Government organizations. The participants consisted of nine (60%) Maryland State employees and six (40%) former employees who met the study's inclusion criteria outlined in Chapter 3. Each of the former employees had separated from the state service within the past 4 years. All the participants had served in their current position for more than 1 year at the time of their interview, and all of them began their service through one of Maryland's competitive hiring processes.

Those interviewed were all regular participants in at least one of their organization's strategic management activities; however, their responsibilities were diverse. Four (26.67%) of the participants were directly responsible for strategic planning and performance measurement programs. Three (20%) participants were C-suite level executives responsible for providing executive direction. The eight (53.33%) other participants were responsible for policy development, procurement, finance, workforce development, compliance, and program management. The group of participants had an average of 18.6 years of service with Maryland's state government, ranging from 6 to 40 years. There were two (13.33%) participants with more than 30 years of service, five (33.33%) with 20-29 years of service, four (26.67%) with 10-19 years of service, and four (26.67%) with fewer than 10 years of service.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place from December 7, 2018 to January 4, 2019. The interviews ranged from 19 minutes to 45 minutes with an average duration of 31 minutes.

Data were collected via semistructured interviews with each participant. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) served as the only data collection instrument for each interview. There were no refusals to answer any of the questions; however, there were three (20%) participants who had limited experience with the budgeting process and two (13.33%) additional participants who had limited experience with the procurement process.

Data saturation was achieved after interviews with 15 participants. The process to confirm data saturation was outlined in Chapter 3. To check for data saturation, I conducted 12 interviews and produced a list of initial themes. I then conducted three additional interviews to check for the emergence of new themes. Data saturation was confirmed when no new themes emerged in the three additional interviews. Although it was my intention to use snowball sampling (see Griffith, Morris, & Thakar, 2016), it was not necessary because there were more volunteer participants than required to meet data saturation.

Each semistructured interview was audio-recorded using the Rev audio recording application for mobile devices. A laptop with microphone was available during each interview in case the mobile device failed. The interviews were transcribed using Rev.com. I reviewed each transcript for accuracy and forwarded the documents to the participants for their review. This process of member checking allowed the participants to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts.

I scripted field notes during and following each interview. The field notes were used to annotate nonverbal communication such as changes in tone, posture, and eye



contact. Field notes were also used to annotate apparent changes in mood. The field notes were combined with the interview transcripts following member-checking by the participants. Each transcript was then loaded into the Dedoose application to facilitate data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

I conducted data analysis in accordance with the descriptive phenomenological method as described by Giorgi (2009). I uploaded each interview transcript into the Dedoose application prior to the analysis and used it throughout the data analysis process. I began the descriptive phenomenological method by reading each transcript to gain a holistic sense of the phenomenon. I read the entire transcript without attempting to analyze the content. This step allowed me to immerse myself in the data and to see descriptions of phenomenon that I did not hear during the interviews. The second step of the analysis required psychological phenomenological reduction. I reduced each transcript to the participant's descriptions related to the phenomenon of strategic management in Maryland. The transcripts in the Dedoose application were modified to remove the nonrelevant descriptions.

The third step of the analysis required the identification and parsing of meaning units within each transcript. I read each transcript with the goal of identifying the psychological meaning units and separated each transcript into a series of meaning units, simplifying the identification of clusters of meaning. Clusters of meaning are phrases and patterns that are significant to the topic being studied (Groenewald, 2004). Coding within the Dedoose application was employed to identify those clusters within each transcript.

The fourth step in the approach described by Giorgi (2009) is to transform the participants' natural statements into expressions that are phenomenologically and psychologically sensitive. The fifth step is to take the transformed meaning units to describe the overall psychological experience (Giorgi et al., 2017). During the fourth and fifth steps, I elaborated each cluster into themes that are summarized in this section.

The participants' descriptions of their lived experiences were elaborated into five themes. Each participant conveyed their experiences using their own natural statements. I was able to identify leadership tenure, managing for results, strategic management resources, influence, and political skills as concepts experienced by multiple participants. Each theme is explained further in this chapter. The participants' contribution to each theme is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

<i>Contribution to Themes</i>					
Participant	Themes				
	Leadership Tenure	MFR	Resources	Influence	Political Skill
1	Yes		Yes	Yes	
2	Yes		Yes	Yes	
3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Yes			Yes	Yes
8	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Yes		Yes	Yes	
10	Yes			Yes	
11			Yes	Yes	
12	Yes		Yes	Yes	
13	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
14	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
15	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	

*Note.* Themes were identified through data analysis of participant interviews.

### **Theme 1: Leadership Tenure**

The short tenure of elected and appointed officials was identified by 14 (93.33%) of the 15 participants as a challenge for strategic management. Appointed officials frequently change in conjunction with the changes at the gubernatorial level. Participants indicated that the short tenures presented challenges with making long-term plans (longer than 3 years) when change frequently occurs at 4 years. These 14 participants expressed apprehensiveness in their descriptions of their lived experiences. The nature of the participants' experiences reveal participants may have been uneasy about their ability to fulfil their organizations' missions and deliver services for their stakeholders. Further, four participants (26.67%) indicated that elected officials are hesitant to conduct planning in the fourth year of a term. For example, Participant 7 stated,

I think it constrains it a little bit because depending on where we are in that election cycle. Right after the new administration comes in, if you've got a 4-year or 5-year project you can get it through. If you're in the election year cycle or something, it's more short-term thinking.

The most dominant emotions revealed were pessimism and anticipation. The four participants' descriptions revealed pessimism about the ability to plan and execute major strategies in the later portion of an elected or appointed official's term. The participants described the need to anticipate change. Participant 14 conveyed the following experience:

So, your plans will shift and change, based on the new leadership of government that comes into play. Sometimes it might not affect certain

agencies. And sometimes it does. But you must be ready to change. And you must be able to say, “Is the change difficult? Is it going to cost you more resources?”

## **Theme 2: Managing for Results**

This theme contains topics the participants believed to be important about the MFR program. The 12 participants (80%) familiar with program generally expressed contentment with MFR and its requirements. These participants appeared to accept the need to comply with the program’s requirements despite their opinions of its effectiveness. They acknowledged that the program is well intentioned. Seven (58.33%) of the 12 participants familiar with the program acknowledged that it was intended to lead agencies to conduct strategic planning and performance management. However, five of these seven (71.43%) indicated that recent changes including page limitations and a focus on page formatting have reduced the overall effectiveness of the program. These five participants expressed dissatisfaction with the recent changes. Two of the seven (28.6%) participants familiar with MFR expressed frustration in their descriptions of their experiences. For example, Participant 3 stated, “I think the idea of it was absolutely the right thing to do . . . But sometimes I got frustrated that you were just measuring for the sake of measuring rather than measuring to achieve results.” Participant 6 supported that position by stating, “I think it was good when it started and at this point, it’s kind of a wasted effort . . . And I think at this point, we’re just measuring things for the fact of measuring.” Participant 4 stated, “I don’t think most state agencies would conduct strategic planning without it. That said, it has problems. We became very focused on

formatting and stopped focusing on the content in my opinion.” Thus, the participants indicated content with the program’s original purpose but dissatisfaction with the program’s current execution.

### **Theme 3: Strategic Management Resources**

Theme 3 contains topics the participants believed to be important about their ability to procure the materials and services necessary to execute their strategic management responsibilities. The participants expressed satisfaction with their ability to acquire the materials and services they identified as important to strategic management. When asked if their agency was able to acquire the enablers necessary for strategic management, Participant 1 stated, “Yeah, we basically, if we needed it, if it has some effect on the department, then we procured it.” Thirteen of the 15 (86.67%) participants concurred that they could acquire everything they needed to conduct strategic management. However, two (13.33%) participants that were C-suite executives were not as committed to saying yes. Participant 10 stated, “We have a procurement process that is in place, but that procurement process has to also be taken into consideration with other priorities for the entire state, which sometimes may cause a conflict.” This participant elaborated further, indicating that procurements are sometimes delayed or deferred for lengthy periods of time.

The most dominant emotion conveyed was satisfaction. Participants acknowledged and accepted Maryland’s complex procurement process. For example, Participant 1 stated, “in most positions, and especially in procurement, and inventory . . . you have certain guidelines and procedures that have to be followed. It’s not the same as

in the private sectors.” Five of the 15 participants (33.3%) acknowledged the procurement function is executed by experienced professionals outside of the functional area responsible for strategic management.

#### **Theme 4: Influence**

As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, influence is the modification of an actor’s behavior due to the behavior of another actor or group (Arts & Verschuren, 1999; Bello & Spano, 2015). The participants described different methods of experiencing political influence. All 15 participants experienced some form of political influence.

**Cluster 4.1: Formal communication.** Six of the participants (40%) experienced formal communication. Those six participants (40%) described experiences that revealed public statements by elected officials such as the governor, as well as by appointed officials in the cabinet, are effective at influencing their decisions. As I outlined in the literature review, chief executives typically have approval power over agencies’ guiding documents such as plans and budgets (Kim, 2015). The participants’ descriptions of their experiences with formal communication were indicative of their acceptance of that form of influence. For example, while describing public statements from a governor, Participant 3 stated, “That’s a kind of like normal influence that you kind of expect and want. Because, agencies feel good, too, in aligning themselves with a bigger picture.” Other participants indicated their acceptance by describing their experiences as routine occurrences. For example, Participant 5 described the routine nature of rewriting strategic plans based on changes in elected officials. Participant 5 stated, “as good as nature may be of that particular older plan, because of who’s on the cover, it’s sort of discounted.”

This participant continued to describe workarounds to mitigate the work required for this routine occurrence.

Three participants (20%) described experiences where a governor stated a priority publicly to the media that led the participants to modify the priorities of their agencies.

Participant 3 stated,

So, the Governor will put out his or her priorities and say, “During my term in office, this is what I want to address.” So as a state agency head, you kind of have an obligation to both your boss and your agency to make sure you’re aligned.

Statements by those participants demonstrate that influence can have positive impacts.

Elaborating on the previous example, a participant described an energy efficiency priority communicated by a governor that allowed their agency to implement an unplanned energy efficiency project more quickly than they could have otherwise. In another example, the participant realized increased support for a program they managed after a public statement by the governor. The participant indicated that leaders sought to expand the program from its founding agency to other agencies across the state.

**Cluster 4.2: Informal communication.** The participants described experiences where influence was communicated informally through direct messages from elected and appointed officials, as well as by their staffs. The participants’ descriptions conveyed a range of psychological states. Three of the seven participants (42.9%) that experienced informal communication described dissatisfaction. For example, Participant 2 stated “I didn’t like the ultimate outcome. I felt . . . that those funds could have been used to help local agencies that serve citizens within the state . . . If I could have changed it, I really

would have.” Three of the seven participants (42.9%) frustration with their experience. Those three participants described situations where the business decision made by the participant did not match the political decision which was ultimately executed. One of the seven participants (14.3%) described surprise and satisfaction. The participant stated “It was kind of a nice decision. I personally thought after it was done. . . . Yeah, we shouldn’t have complained about it, so much.” It was actually kind of a nice outcome.”

Seven participants (46.67%) provided examples of elected and appointed officials influencing business decisions for political purposes that were communicated informally. Those modifications included changing the implementation of a business decision to follow significant political events such as an election, influencing procurement decisions, and influencing policy decisions that impact large groups of stakeholders. For example, three participants (20%) described situations where staff from a governor’s office agreed with a business decision but instructed them to delay the implementation of the decision until an upcoming election had past. Three participants (20%) described examples where an agency made a procurement decision that was modified for political purposes. In one of those examples, the agency found a lower cost for an item from a vendor outside of the state but was instructed to use a Maryland-based firm despite the higher cost. Another participant described an approved wage increase for one of the state’s unions while other unions did not receive the same increase. From a business perspective, the participant felt their agency would have approved a smaller across the board increase for all its unions.



**Theme 5: Political Skill**

Throughout the interviews, participants indicated that they believed they needed to develop skills over their careers to manage elected and appointed officials as stakeholders. As identified in the literature review, leadership in the public sector often requires the ability to address complex public policy issues, the use of negotiation and conflict resolution to balance political interests and values, the ability to effectively communicate strategic direction, and the ability to influence policy decisions and practices (Fu, 2012; Tizard, 2012; Hansen & Ferlie, 2016). The interview protocol did not have a specific question about political skills; however, five (33.33%) participants introduced the topic. For example, while describing a change in state leadership from one political party to another, Participant 8 stated,

The policies were the same, again, because they're political party neutral. It was just how to ensure that the policies could be established through the planning effort, through messaging and understanding what was important to each of the different political parties.

Participant 8 continued to describe that they learned over time to effectively communicate strategies in a manner which aligned with the priorities of each political party. Participant 14, a senior leader within their agency, stated, "Your skillset has to be such, and your mindset has to be such, that you know the process of what change means in government, when the highest level gets changed." The participants' descriptions indicate that they anticipate the need for change throughout their careers. It may further indicate that they are acceptant of the type of change associated with political cycles.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

As outlined in Chapter 3, trustworthiness in qualitative research is evaluated by credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Cope, 2014; Shenton, 2004). To ensure credibility, the study strictly followed the descriptive phenomenological method described by Giorgi as outlined in Chapter 3. Using that accepted qualitative research method supports the trustworthiness of this study.

The dependability of the study is supported by the quantity and quality of the data gathered. I conducted semi structured interviews with each participant using an interview protocol that was field tested by experts in phenomenological research. Those interviews were audio recorded and transcribed through a professional transcription service, Rev.com. I provided each participant with the opportunity to check the contents of the transcript of their interview to ensure its accuracy. This process promoted the quality of the data gathered. The process to ensure data saturation described in Chapter 3 was followed extensively. Twelve interviews were conducted and analyzed. Data saturation was confirmed after three additional interviews did not reveal any new themes. This process ensures that the quantity of data was sufficient to support the dependability of this study.

Transferability is the ability of the findings from this study to apply to other situations (Cope, 2014). I used triangulation to evaluate the transferability of the data. Each of the 15 (100%) interviews contained similar clusters that led to the development of the themes presented earlier in this chapter. The themes are consistent with the synthesis of relevant scientific research I presented in Chapter 2. The consistency of

interviews with each other and the consistency of the themes to the previous research support the transferability of these findings to other situations.

Finally, the confirmability of this study is its ability to convey the experiences of the participants, not the researcher (Shenton, 2004). The processes outlined to support the credibility, dependability, and transferability of this study also support its confirmability. I maintained documentation of the processes to provide an audit trail for examination if necessary.

### **Study Results**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify and report the lived experiences of public sector employees who encountered political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in the State of Maryland. Five themes emerged in the data as a result of the coding of participants' responses. Quotes from the participants were provided to support the themes and provide context.

The participants were asked to describe their experiences encountering political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in the State of Maryland. Theme 2 MFR, Theme 3 Resources, and Theme 4 Influence are all connected directly to political influence. All the participants (100%) described being the recipients of political influence while executing their duties as described in Theme 4. The participants' experiences included influences from formal methods such as public statements from elected officials and informal methods including private communications from staffers. The participants also conveyed multiple psychological states including

acceptance, frustration, dissatisfaction, and contentment during their descriptions of their experiences. For example, participant 1 stated “I feel like sometimes, depending on the governor, it seemed like the state employees . . . weren’t relative.” The participant continued to elaborate on the situation stating, “I mean the management was fine, but they were just there, and it was just like they didn’t have anything to do with their mission.” That participant was not alone in commenting on appointed leaders. For example, Participant 2 was asked a follow-up question about a senior leader. The participant stated “Actually, I was impressed with his credentials, but as administrations changed, and you work with different people, it varied . . . and sometimes I did not feel that way.” That participant continued to describe a series of appointed leaders which they felt were not qualified. Participant 2 elaborated further by stating there were leaders “that I did not feel were qualified, but that were there as a fulfillment of a political favor.” Those two participants appeared to express indifference towards appointed leaders. Participant 14 provided an additional perspective through their description of their experiences. Participant 14 stated the following:

But politics is a sticky thing, you know? And sometime, I just, I try to be, not so much neutral, but I am loyal to whatever my duties and responsibilities are, and that has kept me on the straight and narrow, because I’m doing everything by what the black and white says, the book. . . . And that way, it doesn’t make a difference who’s in office, who’s at the head of the agency, my job is the same.

Those three participants expressed confidence that while appointed leaders change, the overall missions of their organizations do not.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I presented an analysis of the data collected from the participants. The semi structured in-person interviews provided 465 minutes of audio recordings containing the experiences of the 15 participants. Five themes emerged from the data which were consistent with each other as well as with the literature review presented in Chapter 2. In Theme 1, the participants addressed the research question by describing their lived experiences related to the relatively short tenures of elected and appointed officials who attempt to influence them. In Theme 2, the participants addressed the research question by describing their experiences with Maryland's legislatively mandated strategic planning requirement. In Theme 3, the participants addressed the research question by describing their experiences with procuring strategic management enablers. In Theme 4, the participants addressed the research question by describing their experiences receiving political influences through both formal and informal methods. In Theme 5, the participants addressed the research question by describing political skills connected to their lived experiences. The consistency of the data and the adherence of the study to the descriptive phenomenological method support the trustworthiness of this study. Chapter 5 will contain my interpretation of the study's findings. Chapter 5 will also present a summary of the limitations on the study's trustworthiness, implications for positive social change, and future research recommendations.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of public sector employees influenced by politics while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in Maryland. Prior researchers have concluded that political influence can occur even without an actual intervention into the decision-making process (Arts & Verschuren, 1999; Bello & Spano, 2015). Researchers have also concluded that political approaches to strategic management can result in ill-defined strategies and ambiguity (Favoreu et al., 2016). The results regarding strategic management in relation to this study's purpose, problem, and central research question can improve understanding of the connection between influence and strategic management decisions. Findings of this study may help identify types and sources of political influence and its potential impacts on public sector employees.

Descriptive phenomenology was selected to as the method to collect and interpret the lived experiences of the participants from their perspective. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 15 participants. These interviews provided the rich data that were analyzed to provide the findings. Five themes emerged from the data that were consistent with each other as well as with the literature review presented in Chapter 2: leadership tenure, managing for results, strategic management resources, influence, and political skills. Theme 1, leadership tenure, was comprised of the participants' descriptions pertaining to strategic management challenges related to the short tenure of elected and appointed officials. Theme 2, MFR, was comprised of the participants' descriptions pertaining to purpose and execution of the legislatively mandated strategic management

program. Theme 3, strategic management resources, was comprised of the participants' descriptions of their experiences with procuring the services and products necessary for strategy implementation. Theme 4, political influence, was comprised of the participants' descriptions of their experiences pertaining to influence from elected and appointed officials. Theme 5, political skills, was comprised of the participants' descriptions of the skills they identified as necessary for success in their political environment. The interpretation of the data is grounded in the conceptual framework comprised of stakeholder theory and economic theory of the firm. In this chapter, I present my interpretation of the study's findings, its limitations, implications for positive social change, and recommendations for further research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This study's results align with several concepts in the literature. For example, the participants' experiences with MFR support previous research studies conducted by Moynihan and Kroll (2016) and Tama (2018). These researchers identified that legislation and public policies requiring strategic management often contain requirements that meet the needs of political actors, not the organizations conducting the planning. The participants' experiences are also consistent with the research of Ciobanica (2014), who suggested that the execution of strategy in the public sector often relies on the procurement of services and goods, and the ability of chief executives to influence procurement in the public sector potentially increases their influence over the strategic management of public sector organizations. Finally, the participants' experiences are consistent with studies conducted by Fu (2012) and Ugaddan and Parks (2017), who

stated that public sector leaders require the ability to address complex public policy issues and use of negotiation and conflict resolution to balance political interests and values.

The analysis and interpretation of the participants' responses led me to make three conclusions. First, Maryland state government employees perceive both positive and negative impacts from political influence on strategic management. Second, consistent with the literature review, Maryland state government employees perceive that legislation that required strategic planning and performance management in Maryland has encouraged further strategic initiatives. Finally, although Maryland state government employees experience political influence, they have developed skills to mitigate those influences and execute their agency missions. I will elaborate on each conclusion and describe their relationships to the reviewed relevant literature in the following sections.

### **Positive and Negative Impacts of Political Influence**

The findings confirmed that participants experienced political influence through both formal and informal methods, in concordance with the literature review presented in Chapter 2. Participants described experiencing influence through formal methods including public statements by a governor as well as statement in formal meetings by the governor and cabinet officials. According to the participants, public statements motivated them to align their initiatives to match those of elected officials making the statements. Participants identified informal methods including phone calls, small-group private meetings, and personal conversations with staff members of elected officials. The seven participants (46.7%) who experienced informal communication appeared anxious when



describing these interactions. The most frequent emotion communicated by these seven participants appeared to be contempt. The participants identified examples of positive and negative impacts on their agencies, regardless of the method of influence. The participants who conveyed positive impacts from political influence expressed surprise over the results.

Previous research has identified that the strategic planning process can be positively influenced through the engagement of multiple stakeholders with varying types of inputs, which is supported by the participants' experiences (Lee et al., 2018). There were three examples provided by participants where a political actor influenced a business decision that resulted in a positive outcome for another group of stakeholders. Potential negative impacts of political influence were identified in the literature review. For example, Bello and Spano (2015) and Favoreu et al (2016) concluded that political influences can undermine the routine execution of decision-making processes in the public sector. Seven participants provided examples of political factors influencing decisions to delay the execution of business strategies for political purposes.

### **Strategic Thinking**

Consistent with the literature review, legislation that required strategic planning and performance management in Maryland has influenced both appointed officials and careerists to think strategically. For instance, Tama (2018) concluded that legislative and administrative requirements can distract leaders from addressing the important strategic issues faced by the organization. Addressing these strategic issues is the intent of strategic management (Bao, 2015; Soloduchko-Pelc, 2015; Storchevoi, 2015). The

participants identified strategic management activities that they developed based on their experiences and knowledge of best practices. This is exemplified by the number of nonlegislated strategic activities the participants engage in. For example, Participant 4 and Participant 5 described a cross-functional team they developed within their organization to evaluate progress towards the organization's strategic goals and objectives. Thirteen of the 15 participants (87%) identified strategic management activities that they engaged in within their organizations that exceeded the requirements established by MFR. The participants concluded that MFR was ineffective as a strategic management tool based on their experiences. Seven of the participants (46.7%) expressed that their agencies had developed strategic plans in addition to the efforts required by MFR.

### **Political Skills**

Fourteen (93.33%) participants expressed challenges with the frequent changes in political actors. The participants described planning efforts that were suspended due to changes in elected officials, plans with shorter planning horizons than the participants preferred due to election cycles, and the need to justify previously developed long-term organizational plans to newly appointed officials. Previous research has indicated that collaborative relationships in strategic management require soft management skills, flexibility, and other analytical techniques to support the development of collective strategies (Axelsson, 2016; Williams & Lewis, 2008). The participants described experiences where they had the need to manage stakeholder expectations, negotiate the legislative process, use persuasion to convince new leadership to continue the direction of

previous leadership, and ability to adapt to new political philosophies while executing the mission of their agencies. The participants' descriptions of their experiences are consistent with the findings of Axelsson (2016) as well as the findings of Williams and Lewis (2008). The participants' descriptions of their experiences support the need for strategic management training specific to the public sector.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations to this study included its design, its geographic boundary, time restraints, and my personal biases. The design of this study was a descriptive phenomenological psychological approach as described by Giorgi (2009). The descriptive phenomenological psychological approach generally involves small numbers of participants that have a shared lived experience. This study was limited to 15 public sector employees who shared the experience of engaging in strategic management in Maryland State Government.

The design of the study required a purposive sampling technique (Griffith, Morris, & Thakar, 2016). Although it was my intention to use snowball sampling (see Griffith, Morris, & Thakar, 2016), it was not necessary as there were more volunteer participants than required to meet data saturation. However, the study's inclusion criteria combined with my 20 years of service led to a pool of participants where 100% had at least general familiarity with the researcher. This led to a level of comfort between each participant and me that may have facilitated a more forthright and open interview. Replicating the results of this study may be difficult with a different study design.

The study was limited in geography to the State of Maryland. As outlined in Chapter 3, Maryland has specific strategic management requirements that made it ideal for this study. Transferring the study's results to other locations is a limitation due to differing legislated requirements, organizational cultures, and political ideologies. The inclusion criteria required volunteers to be regular participants in their organization's strategic management processes, and not be a political appointee. These criteria may limit the generalization further as excluded segments of the population may have differing experiences.

The study was also limited by time restraints. The participants volunteered their time to participate in the study. Participants were asked to plan for 60-minute interview. The average interview lasted 31 minutes. Fifteen interviews produced 465 minutes of recorded interview data. This substantial amount of data required significant time to transcribe, organize, analyze, and interpret.

This study was also limited by researcher bias. As outlined in Chapter 3, I spent 20 years as a Maryland State Government employee. My responsibilities included strategic management activities including strategic planning, performance management, and policy development. I also directly experienced political influence several times over my career. To manage this bias, Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach was strictly followed. Bracketing, a self-reflective process, was used to identify and set aside my assumptions and a priori knowledge about the phenomenon being studied (see Giorgi, 2009; O'Halloran et al., 2018; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Bracketing was conducted before, during, and after data collection and documented in my research

journal. Potential themes were documented as they emerged throughout the data collection process. Finally, the Dedoose application was used to maintain objectivity throughout data analysis.

### **Recommendations**

To further research in the discipline of strategic management, specifically in the public sector, several recommendations for future research are below. Recommendations include specific considerations to further investigate the topic of this study, as well as general research to advance our collective understanding of the discipline within the context of the public sector. As outlined in Chapter 2, the public sector has unique leadership challenges which impact the execution of strategic management. The recommendations that follow consider those unique challenges, as well as previous research reviewed.

The focus of this study was not to quantify the attributes of political influence nor its influence on strategic management. The participants described experiences where they expressed varying levels of acceptance of political influence. In the future, researchers should examine public sector employee attitudes about varying methods of political influence and how they impact the strategic management of their agencies. Researchers should also consider expanding this study to different geographies and populations.

The participants described experiences where they felt the need for political skills and competencies. As discussed earlier, the participants conveyed experiences where they had the need to manage expectations, use negotiation, use persuasion, and adapt to new political philosophies. Although Fu (2012) examined political competencies and skills

using a population of United States federal government participants, I recommend those competencies and skills be examined in the context of state and municipal governments. It is recommended future researchers examine the causality between strategic management requirements and strategic thinking. Researchers should also consider a model of strategic management competencies for public sector employees.

### **Implications**

#### **Positive Social Change**

Actions based on applying information from Themes 4 & 5 from this study have the potential to create positive social change related to the use of government resources and accountability. The results of this study reveal that Maryland State employees engaged in the strategic management of their organization are very likely to experience political influence. The participants identified that strategies communicated in public statements by elected officials can influence careerist at the agency level. Six of the participants (40%) provided examples of these statements aligning actions across the government to support the elected official's desire. Public statements may be a tool align employees engaged in strategic management across an entire government. Based on this finding, I recommend elected and appointed officials use public statement to communicate important statewide goals, objectives and strategic initiatives to employees. This may lead to positive social change if political actors can effectively use public statements to align careerist actions to prepare for the future needs of their organizations.

Theme 2 contains some support for previous claims that legislated requirements for strategic management can lead to strategic thinking. Thirteen of the 15 participants

(87%) revealed strategic management activities above the requirements legislated in MFR. Government organizations without legislated strategic management requirements may benefit from well-crafted legislation. The GPRA Modernization Act at the federal level made changes to the legislation to make it reflect the maturation of the strategic management discipline (Moynihan & Kroll, 2016). Based on this finding, I recommend legislators and chief executives within state and municipal governments consider updating existing strategic management legislation to reflect contemporary strategic management best practices. I further recommend that legislators for states and municipal governments that do not have existing strategic management should enact legislation which requires subordinate agencies to conduct contemporary strategic management best practices. Positive social change may be achieved if similar modernization efforts occur at the state and municipal levels.

### **Methodological**

The design of this qualitative study was based on the descriptive phenomenological approach as described by Giorgi (2009). As outlined in Chapter 3, descriptive phenomenology is different from other qualitative designs due to the use of descriptions from the participants as opposed to the researchers themselves. The use of descriptive phenomenology in this study demonstrates its utility as an effective design for the exploration of ill-defined and complex problems. The utilization of a qualitative method for this study is significant as the complexity of the key concepts of strategic management and political influence were not reduced to statistics.

## **Theoretical**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on stakeholder theory and economic theory of the firm. Theme 1 and Theme 5 provide insights into how the experiences of Maryland State Government employees manage stakeholders while engaged in strategic management. Fourteen participants (93.33%) described how they balance the wants and needs of elected against the needs of other stakeholders. All the participants also provided insight into the managerial mindset of senior leaders executing strategic management. This supports stakeholder theory as described by Freeman (1984). The findings of the study also reflect that the participants' agencies are businesses with specific missions that create value for the citizens of Maryland. All the participants in this study described decisions using the terms business decision and political decision. This consideration of value-proposition by the participants supports economic theory of the firm as described by Coase (1937).

## **Conclusion**

Millions of public sector employees in the United States, as well as the American public, are impacted by the practice of strategic management in public sector organizations. Previous researchers have argued social and financial pressures have bolstered the need for public sector employees to plan for future challenges within their organizations. Many governments have legislated requirements for their agencies to conduct strategic management activities including strategic planning, performance management, and performance-based budgeting. These requirements in the context of the public sector are subject to political influences.



In this dissertation research study, I examined the lived experiences of public sector employees who have been subjected to political influence while engaged in the strategic management of their organizations in the State of Maryland. Three conclusions were made as a result of the data analysis: first, Maryland State Government employees perceive both positive and negative impacts from political influence on strategic management; second, Maryland State Government employees perceive that legislation that required strategic planning and performance management has encouraged further strategic initiatives; and finally, Maryland State Government employees have developed skills to mitigate political influences and execute their agency missions.

Recommendations for future research include the expansion of this study to different geographies, quantitative examinations of the extent of political influence on strategic management, and examinations of the specific skills and competencies that enable effective public sector strategic management.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- ☐ **Date:**\_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ **Time Started:**\_\_\_\_\_ **Time Ended:**\_\_\_\_\_ **Total Time:**\_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ **Participant ID #:**\_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ **Fulfil implied consent requirements. Get the consent form signed.**
- ☐ **Inform the participant that I am starting the recording.**
- ☐ **Announce the interview date, start time, and participant's unique identification number**
- ☐ **Introduction Script:**

Do I have your permission to audio record this session as we previously discussed? Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study. My name is Aarion Franklin, and I am a candidate for the PhD degree in Management at Walden University. I am examining political influences on the strategic management of public sector organizations. I have several open-ended questions for you which will help me gain an understanding of your specific experiences. As we previously discussed, your entire interview will remain anonymous. I will not ask you to identify yourself during this interview. You can chose to not answer a question if it makes you uncomfortable, and you have the right to terminate this interview at any time. Are you ready to begin the interview?

- ☐ **How long have you been a Maryland State Employee?**
- ☐ **How long have you been in your current position?**
- ☐ **Tell me about the responsibilities of your current position?**

Strategic management consists of activities to assist the firm establish long-term objectives, conceptualize overall direction, conduct planning, make decisions, allocate resources, and develop emergent initiatives. Key activities associated with strategic management include establishing the mission of the organization, determining strategic objectives, specifying strategic choices, identifying required resources, establishing timelines, determining competitive advantages, developing broad strategies, designing a global policy, and combining all of those elements into the organization's overall strategy.

- ☐ **Please describe for me how you are involved in your organization's strategic management activities.**
  - Potential prompts:
    - What are your beliefs about the effectiveness of those programs?
    - How often do the activities occur?
    - Who else participates in the activities with you?

- Are there any interactions with elected or appointed officials during those processes?
- **How have you managed to strategically meet your organization's perceived legislated requirements?**
  - Potential prompts:
    - What are your perceptions of managing for results?
    - What are your assumptions about the role of the office of performance excellence?
- **Have you participated in any strategic management activities which are not legislatively mandated? If yes, please describe your assumptions about why these programs exist in your organization.**
  - Potential prompts:
    - How about programs such as the Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program?
    - How about process improvement programs such as Lean or Six Sigma?
- **Please describe your experiences with the budgeting or funding of the strategic priorities of your organization?**
  - Potential prompts:
    - What are your perceptions of the role of elected or appointed officials in the budgeting process?
    - What is your involvement in the budgeting process?
    - What is the approval process for your budget once it is completed by your organization?
- **Please describe your experiences with procuring goods and services to support the strategic management of your organization. What are your perceptions about the ability of your organization to procure strategic management enablers?**
  - Potential prompts:
    - Please describe an organizational strategy where procurement played an essential role in its execution.
    - How are major procurements approved?
    - Is there a requirement for major procurements to align with strategic priorities?
    - Please describe any situations where your organization's strategy could not be implemented due to a procurement decision?
- **Please describe for me how you interact with appointed senior leaders during strategic management activities? What are your assumptions about their motivations during strategic management activities?**
  - Potential prompts:
    - I'm specifically interested in senior leaders appointed by elected officials



- Please describe any instance where you discussed the potential political implications of an organizational goal, objective, or strategy?
  - **Please describe for me any experiences you have had where a business decision or strategy was selected based on a political outcome as opposed to a business outcome? What were your assumptions about the potential repercussions of selecting the business outcome over the political outcome?**
    - Potential prompts:
      - Was that decision driven by organizational leaders, or someone external to the organization?
      - Do you think your organization would have made the same decision if you were an independent authority, or private business? Why or why not?
      - How did you feel about the decision that was made?
  - **How have you experienced political influence while conducting strategic management activities? What are your beliefs about why there was an attempt to influence your actions or decisions.**
    - Potential prompts:
      - What type of position did that individual hold (someone appointed inside the organization, appointed to a regulatory agency, legislator, executive branch, etc)?
      - What did they ask you to do (or not do)?
      - How did they communicate with you (formally or informally)?
      - How did the influence modify you're the action you were planning to take?
      - How did you feel about the occasion and its outcome?
  - **Ending Script**
- That is all of the questions I have for now. I sincerely thank you for participating in my study. If it is OK with you, I may contact you if I need further clarification on any of your answers. Over the next few weeks I will continue to interview additional participants. I will transcribe and study each transcript before conducting my analysis. I will provide you with a word-for-word transcript of your interview within the next two weeks. If you do not receive the transcript within two weeks, please contact me via email at [REDACTED]. Please review the transcript and let me know if you have concerns over its inclusion in the study. If I do not hear from you within one week of sending you the transcript, I will assume your consent to continue your participation in the study. If you are interested, I will share the results of my study with you once it is completed has been accepted by my University. I will now end the recording.

After ending the recording, ask the participant about any other people they know who may be able to provide additional insights into my questions.